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Rebellion under the Palm Trees: Memory, Agrarian Reform and Labor in the Aguán, Honduras

Andres Leon

Graduate Center, City University of New York

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Rebellion under the Palm Trees: Memory, Agrarian Reform and Labor in the Aguán, Honduras

by

Andrés León

City University of New York, Graduate Center

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Professor Marc Edelman

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Professor Gerald Creed

Date

Executive Officer

Professor Kate Crehan
Professor Katherine Verdery
Supervisory Committee

Professor Michael Watts
Outside Reader

The City University of New York
Abstract

Rebellion under the Palm Trees: Memory, Agrarian Reform and Labor in the Aguán, Honduras

by

Andrés León

Advisor: Marc Edelman

On December 9, 2009, the Unified Peasant Movement of the Aguán (Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguán; MUCA) occupied over 20,000 hectares of oil palm covered lands in the Aguán region in the Honduran northern coast. This was the latest, and probably most dramatic, chapter in the region’s tumultuous recent history. This dissertation explores this history and the process of creation of the Aguán region from the perspective of a set of impoverished peasant families that migrated from different parts of Honduras towards the Aguán from the 1970s onwards, in search of a better present and future.

It asks about the processes by which the region went from supposed “empty” space in the 1960s, to centerpiece of the Honduran agrarian reform in the 1970s and 1980s and the principal location of the country’s palm oil industry in the 2000s and site of one of the most intense agrarian conflicts in Latin America at the same time. I argue that by analyzing at the particular history of the palm oil industry in the region, we are able to look at the ways in which agrarian structure and political power come together.

Four are the main threads that hold together this argument: 1. The perspective of passive revolution to approach the process of state formation in postcolonial Central America; 2. The tension between labor capture and flight as a way of approaching the topic of agrarian reform, in the midst of different processes of dispossession and struggle; 3. The consolidation on the ground of the global palm oil assemblage and the move to the center of the region’s life of oil palm monoculture and; 4. The process of creation of historical narratives in the Aguán, as the tension between individual and collective memories.
For each one of these threads, I combine my own ethnographic observations based on eleven months of fieldwork, with different secondary sources and the broader set of theoretical and scholarly work that deals with the topics of primitive accumulation and dispossession, state formation, political ecology and oral history.
To Neil, who never left

A las enanas Alicia y Jimena, para poder disfrutarlas más
Acknowledgments

It feels like a very long time since I decided to move to New York to begin my doctoral studies. Much happened in a relatively short period of time and it would be impossible for me to acknowledge all the intellectual debts and social relations that sustained, nurtured and allowed me to finish this dissertation. I would like to begin by thanking my dissertation committee: Marc Edelman, Katherine Verdery and Kate Crehan. I am deeply grateful of everything they taught me – both in the classroom and outside of it – and the patience, encouragement and trust that they always showed me and my work. Throughout my writing I constantly reminded myself of professor Crehan’s contention that one should try to emulate Gramsci’s mode of enquiring, rather than quoting him every other line. Also, as professor Verdery constantly reminded me, that one should be very careful about not being a victim of the mask of the state and look at the relations, never at the things. Professor Edelman has been more than an advisor in this process. He accompanied me even when he was going through rough paths in his own personal life and provided more support than I could ever have imagined. If in my own work I can be half the professor and advisor that he has been to me, I will be more than happy. I would also like to thank Michael Watts for so generously agreeing to taking on my dissertation as an external reader and writing such an encouraging evaluation.

Leaving Costa Rica and moving to New York was not an easy process. However, the vibrant human and intellectual community that I encountered in the Graduate Center made the whole thing worth it. Professors Ruthie Gilmore, Don Robotham, Michael Blim and John Collins were crucial in my process of learning to navigate graduate school and U.S. academia. In his short period of time in New York, Vinay Gidwani was also a constant source of inspiration.

A particular space in my heart –and mind– is reserved for Neil Smith. Before his untimely passing Neil was always a friend, quick to ask how I was doing and have a chat. He was also part of my second exam committee and definitely much of the little that I know of
geography and the uneven development of capitalism came from conversations and reading with him. He will forever be an inspiring and undying presence in my own work.

I would also like to thank everyone in the department of anthropology, particularly Ellen DeRiso, whose dedication, good humor and patience – even when confronted with slightly nonsensical queries – was fundamental in the whole process.

I also had the luck of getting to know some wonderful fellow students in the CUNY Graduate Center, who always showed easy and unending solidarity and warm friendship. Special thanks to Preeti Sampat, Emily Channell, Margarite Whitten, Neil Agarwal, Saygun Gokariksel, Ahmed Sharif and Mark Drury for sharing smiles and tears and showing with their example that academia, as lonely and endeavor as it can be, can also be very much about sharing and caring for each other. I would also like to mention the Graduate Center Marxist Reading Group, which became an always welcomed haven for wide politically engaged readings, discussions and well deserved drinks afterwards.

Mención aparte y en español para mi familia hispanoparlante neoyorquina, que con un ron, una bailada de cumbia o una cena siempre me hizo sentir un poco más en casa. A Andreina Torres, Julio Arias, Irene Osorio y Ryan Mann-Hamilton; pero sobre todo a Rocío Gil y Martín Cobian por haber estado siempre para lo bonito y para lo no tanto y haberme aguantado y ayudado mucho más allá del deber.

En Honduras también me encontré las puertas y los brazos abiertos de muchas personas. En Tegucigalpa Gilberto Ríos y las demás personas de FIAN Honduras (Danielito, Nelly, Esteban y Claudia) fueron fundamentales para poder desarrollar mi trabajo. Adelay y Javi siempre me ayudaron con un lugar para dormir y unas muy necesarias salidas a conocer Tegucigalpa de noche.
En Tocoa me gustaría agradecer el apoyo brindado por Juana Esquivel y todo el equipo de la Fundación San Alonso Rodríguez, así como el del padre Colatto en la Parroquía, al profesor Tifre y al Chele.

El centro fundamental de mi trabajo en el Aguán siempre fueron las personas del Observatorio Permanente de Derechos Humanos del Aguán, quienes sin preguntarme mucho me abrieron sus casas, me invitaron a sus comunidades y me regalaron sus historias. Al profe, Rodolfo, Daniel, Rigoberto, Irma, Consuelo, Marta y don Pedro, muchas gracias por hacerme sentir siempre bienvenido; sin ustedes definitivamente no habría tesis y mi conocimiento de Honduras y del Aguán sería muchísimo más limitado.

Me sería imposible mencionar a todas las personas que me ayudaron en la Guadalupe Carney, el Mocho, el Despertar, la Nueva Vida y Luzón Palmeras, así que me conformo con mencionar algunos nombres: Odilio, doña Jesus, la familia Morales, la familia Ulloa, Iván, Chago, Marcial, Lastenia y las López. Las palabras no son suficientes para explicar mi agradecimiento, pero espero que este trabajo, de una u otra forma, sea un primer paso en esa dirección.

Me gustaría también agradecerle a Pedro Marchetti y Jenni Casolo por haberme recibido en su casa en Ciudad de Guatemala, contarme sus historias y darme acceso a tanta información. Creo que encontrarán en estas páginas un reflejo de nuestras discusiones.

Finalmente me gustaría agradecerle al excepcional grupo de personas en Costa Rica que en sus relaciones me permitieron llegar hasta aquí y sin quienes sería definitivamente una peor persona, o cuando menos una más aburrida. A Checho, Marito, Jorgito, pero sobre todo a la Adri por siempre estar y acompañarme en todo este trayecto, aun cuando no estaba muy claro que era lo que estaba haciendo. No me queda más que esperar tener la posibilidad de pagarles con la misma moneda.

A la familia Herrera por abrirme las puertas y permitirme apadrinar a las enanas; terminar la tesis rápido para ver si las disfruto antes de que crezcan demasiado siempre fue
parte de mi fuerza para continuar. A Jeremy Rayner por haberme apoyado en cada momento de este proceso; por siempre tenderme la mano y estar dispuesto a leer un paper, escuchar mis ideas o simplemente tomarse una cerveza para “hablar paja” un rato.

A la Moka quien inspiró mucho de esto y quien a su manera, y sin saberlo, siempre ha estado presente. A Mariajo por siempre tener una sonrisa, una canción bailable, el cariño y la compañía; todo esto fue un poco más fácil gracias a su constante presencia y sus esfuerzos para que no se me olvidara que hay en el mundo algo más que academia. A Alberto por el constante y permanente apoyo y cariño y en algún momento haberme propuesto que me fuera a estudiar afuera. A mi tía Marta por su apoyo incondicional. Finalmente, a mi madre por el cariño, apoyo, confianza y ejemplo; nos costó pero ahí poco a poco nos vamos encontrando. Nada, absolutamente nada de esto hubiera salido sin ustedes.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALBA</td>
<td>Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas/Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANACH</td>
<td>Asociación Nacional de Campesinos de Honduras/National Association of Honduran Peasants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANDI</td>
<td>Asociación Nacional de Industriales/National Association of Industrialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APOPA</td>
<td>Asamblea Permanente de Organizaciones Populares del Aguán/Permanent Assembly of Popular Organizations of the Aguán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APROH</td>
<td>Asociación para el Progreso de Honduras/the Honduran Progress Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAP</td>
<td>Proyecto Bajo Aguán/Bajo Aguán Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CACM</td>
<td>Central American Common Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDM</td>
<td>Centro de Derechos de Mujeres/Women Rights Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNA</td>
<td>Consejo Nacional Agrario/the National Agrarian Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNTC</td>
<td>Central Nacional de Trabajadores del Campo/National Rural Workers Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COAPALMA</td>
<td>Cooperativa Agroindustrial de Palma Africana/Agro-industrial Cooperative of African Palm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCOCH</td>
<td>Consejo Coordinador de Organizaciones Campesinas de Honduras/Coordinating Council of Honduran Peasant Organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDEL</td>
<td>Comités de Emergencia Local/Local Emergency Committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COFADEH</td>
<td>Comité de Familiares Detenidos-Desaparecidos de Honduras/Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COHDEFOR</td>
<td>Coorporación Hondureña de Desarrollo Forestal/Honduran Forestry Development Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONADI</td>
<td>Corporación Nacional de Inversión/National Investments Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPA</td>
<td>Coordinadora de Organizaciones Populares del Aguán/Popular Organizations Network of the Aguán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPINH</td>
<td>Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras/Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CREM</td>
<td>Centro Regional de Entrenamiento Militar/Regional Military Training Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTH</td>
<td>Central de Trabajadores Hondureños/the Honduran Labor Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV</td>
<td>Comisión de la Verdad/Truth Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVR</td>
<td>Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación/Truth and Reconciliation Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAC</td>
<td>Empresa Asociativa Campesina/Peasant Associative Enterprises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EACI</td>
<td>Empresa Asociativa Campesina Isletas/the Isletas Peasant Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAP</td>
<td>Frente de Acción Popular/Popular Action Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FECADEH</td>
<td>Federación Campesina Diversificada de Honduras/National Diversified Peasant Federation of Honduras</td>
</tr>
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<td>FECORAH</td>
<td>Federación de Cooperativas para la Reforma Agraria de Honduras/Honduran Federation of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives</td>
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<td>FELDA</td>
<td>Federal Land Development Authority</td>
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<td>FENACH</td>
<td>Federación Nacional de Campesinos de Honduras/National Peasant Federation of Honduras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FENAGH</td>
<td>Federación Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos de Honduras/National Federation of Farmers and Cattlemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIAN</td>
<td>Food First Information and Action Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>FNRP</td>
<td>Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular/National Popular Front of Resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSAR</td>
<td>Fundación San Alonso Rodríguez/San Alonso Rodriguez Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>FSH</td>
<td>Federación Sindical Hondureña/Honduran Union’s Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IADB</td>
<td>Inter-American Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFC</td>
<td>International Financial Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFI</td>
<td>International Financial Institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INAI</td>
<td>Instituto Nacional Agrario/National Agrarian Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISI</td>
<td>Import Substitution Industrialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMA</td>
<td>Ley de Modernización Agraria/Agricultural Development and Modernization Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTP</td>
<td>Land Titling Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>MARCA</td>
<td>Movimiento Auténtico Reivindicador Campesino del Aguán/the Authentic Reclaiming Movement of the Aguán</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Movimiento Campesino del Aguán/Peasant Movement of the Aguán</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCR</td>
<td>Movimiento Campesino de Rigores/Peasant Movement of Rigores</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCRGRC</td>
<td>Movimiento Campesino Refundacional Gregorio Chavez/Gregorio Chavez Refoundational Peasant Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>MUCA</td>
<td>Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguán/Unified Peasant Movement of the Aguán</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organization of American States</td>
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<tr>
<td>OFRANEH</td>
<td>Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras/Black Honduran Fraternal Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPDH</td>
<td>Observatorio Permanente de Derechos Humanos del Aguán/Permanent Observatory of Human Rights of the Aguán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORIT</td>
<td>Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores/Inter American Regional Organisation of Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Partido Liberal/Liberal Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PN</td>
<td>Partido Nacional/National Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRO</td>
<td>Patronato Regional de Occidente/Regional Occidental Community Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRDH</td>
<td>Partido Revolucionario Democrático de Honduras/the Revolutionary and Democratic Honduran Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCCARA</td>
<td>Programa de Capacitación Campesina de la Reforma Agraria/Peasant Capacitation Program for Land Reform</td>
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<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Pastoral Social/Social Concerns Ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSPO</td>
<td>Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil Production</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAG</td>
<td>Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería/Agriculture and Husbandry Secretariat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAP</td>
<td>Structural Adjustment Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFC</td>
<td>Standard Fruit Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>SJP</td>
<td>Socorro Jurídico Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>UD</td>
<td>Partido Unificación Democrática/Democratic Unification Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UFCO</td>
<td>United Fruit Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>the United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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Introduction: the coup from above, the coup from below and the agrarian conflict in the Bajo Aguán

The parliamentary regime lives by discussion, how shall it forbid discussion? Every interest, every social institution, is here transformed into general ideas, debated as ideas; how shall any interest, any institution, sustain itself above thought and impose itself as an article of faith? The struggle of the orators on the platform evokes the struggle of the scribblers of the press; the debating club in parliament is necessarily supplemented by debating clubs in the salons and the bistros; the representatives, who constantly appeal to public opinion, give public opinion the right to speak its real mind in petitions. The parliamentary regime leaves everything to the decision of majorities; how shall the great majorities outside parliament not want to decide? When you play the fiddle at the top of the state, what else is to be expected but that those down below dance?

Karl Marx (2008:66), *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*

The coup from above

On June 28, 2009, between five and six a.m., Lieutenant Colonel René Antonio Hepburn Bueso, accompanied by a special detachment of the Honduran Army, proceeded to make effective the search warrant on the house of the President of the Republic, Manuel Zelaya. Once at the property, they encountered a group of “armed personnel in uniform,” that were identified as members of the president’s security team, who did not allow him to carry out the warrant and dismissed the validity of the order and thus had to be disarmed and subdued by the soldiers.

With “the opposition defeated,” they entered the house and proceeded to capture Zelaya.

Soon the news would spread all over the world: “In the first military coup in Central America since the end of the cold war, soldiers stormed the presidential palace in the capital, Tegucigalpa, early in the morning, disarming the presidential guard, waking Mr. Zelaya and putting him on a plane to Costa Rica” (Malkin 2009).

This situation created mixed reactions both internationally and domestically.

Internationally, the coup was received with outrage and condemned by everyone, ranging from President Obama – who called it a “terrible precedent” (Cooper and Lacey 2009) – to Hugo Chávez, who decried that “[b]ehind these soldiers are the Honduran bourgeoisie, the rich who
converted Honduras into a Banana Republic, into a political and military base for North American imperialism” (Kozloff 2009).

Domestically, the coup defied such unified positions and rather came to split the country into three neat groups: those against the coup – the Resistance,¹ as they would eventually come to be known –; those in favor² of the “good coup” or “constitutional succession,” as it was euphemistically called (see for example Di Iorio 2010; Martínez 2010); and finally, those that did not have a clear position in relation to the crisis, but were stuck in the middle nevertheless. The only consensus was that what happened on June 28 was the result of a set of historical tensions and conflicts; and that these conflicts had become magnified in its aftermath.

An in-depth study of the coup is still waiting to be written, and this is not the space for one. However, it is important to point out how little the “agrarian question” featured in the discussions and analysis of the coup. In a country where little less than half the population, around 80 percent of the poor and more than half of the economically active population lives in rural areas, this is nothing less than perplexing. In general terms, both national (for example Mejía and Fernández 2010; Salomón 2009) and foreign (for example Ruhl 2010; Meyer 2010) analysts of the coup heavily emphasize the institutional aspects: how the democratic institutions were too weak, the state too corrupt and the elites too reactionary; how Zelaya’s populism had broken the delicate political balance in the country, exacerbated class and social hostilities and thus led to the crisis; how either U.S. imperialism or the expansion of Venezuelan communism were at the root of this situation.

¹ These included the Executive Power, a minority party (Democratic Unification; UD), popular organizations, most unions and peasant organizations, a few Catholic pastors and Dioceses and some local media, particularly the not so small sector of community radios.

² Mainly: the National Congress, the Judiciary, the Constitutional Court, the domestic large capital, the leadership of the traditional parties (National Party [PN] and Liberal Party [PL]), the mainstream media and broad sectors of the middle class.
Probably the best two examples of this lack of analysis of the relation between the coup and the agrarian question are the reports presented by the state sanctioned Truth and Reconciliation Committee (C.V.R. 2011); and by the more left-oriented Truth Committee (C.V. 2012). Only in the second — and offhandedly — is the topic of struggles over land mentioned. Also, little to no mention is made of the peasant movement in either study. Further, the Aguán region in the country’s north coast — the focus of this study and by far the most conflictive regions in the country in the months leading to the coup — is only mentioned indirectly a couple of times: first, in relation to the assassination of a person elsewhere whose sibling was part of the peasant movement in the Aguán; and second, in relation to the closing down of a local TV station by the military.

This is nothing new. It would seem that with the declaration of the 1984 Constitution — which officially began the “transition towards democracy” — discussion of the Honduran agrarian question was abandoned in favor of topics such as the plight of the different indigenous groups that inhabit the country (for example, Tucker 2008; Graham 2009; Brondo 2013), the violence of the urban gangs (for example, Pine 2008; Arana 2005; Ribando 2007), or the supposed “failure” of the state. This of course contrasts with the previous period — particularly between the 1970s and 1980s — when the Honduran peasantry was central to vibrant debates about agrarian reform and its relation to the third world country’s development (see for example, Boyer 1982; Kay 1998; Edelman 1998).

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the consolidation of the so called neoliberal wave, discussion about agrarian reforms and peasant movements was as outdated as reading Lenin, Marx or Chayanov. However, as often happens, the rhythms and fashions of academia are not the same as those of the rest of society. While scholars “forgot” to question the relation between

3 I have cited here only works by U.S.-based scholars. The situation of national academia is not significantly different.
political power and agrarian structure (Moore 1966), the Honduran peasantry remembered well that their history was necessarily one of tension with the state.

**The coup from below**

On December 9, 2009, less than six months after the ousting of Zelaya, around 600 peasant families organized in the Unified Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MUCA), occupied 26 palm oil plantations in the region. Covering a total of around 20,000 hectares, the 28 peasant cooperatives that comprised the movement claimed that those lands had been forcefully and illegally taken away from them in the 1990s by the *terranientes* [large land owners] Miguel Facussé, René Morales and Reinaldo Canales during what came to be known as the “agrarian counter reform.”

Marielos, a 40-ish mother of five, whose features hint at her mixed Salvadoran and Lenca family background, remembers that day well. In an autobiographical note she writes: “I remember well!!! That Wednesday 9 of December, 2009. We left our *aldeas* [villages] and moved towards the lands currently occupied by the three landowning monsters [Facussé, Morales and Canales]. We arrived at the location at 11:00 p.m., evading all the private guard posts.”

Early in the morning of December 10, they took the guards by surprise and disarmed them, taking control of the 26 estates in different parts of the region. Due to the poverty of the families involved, for the first three days of the occupation they did not eat, as they had been unable to bring any food with them. They were constantly surrounded and harassed by the military and the police and sometimes a group would be evicted from one of the estates, only to re-enter the lands once the security forces had left. Eventually, in February 2010, the peasant

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4 I will deal in some depth on this topic at the end of Chapter 1 – with a quick overview of the Honduran reform – and in chapter 3, when I analyze the agrarian counter-reform. At the moment, it suffices to say that between 1992 and 1994, more than half of the land distributed during the agrarian reform (1972-1992) was sold to private investors (COCOCH 2010).
families would leave the estates, after the newly elected and highly disputed government of Porfirio Lobo began to negotiate a deal between MUCA and the landowners. I will expand on the history of MUCA in chapter 5.

In contrast to the academic analysts mentioned in the previous section, for peasant activists such as Marielos, there was a crystal clear connection between the coup and the agrarian history of the country. She writes further in her notes:

The coup d’état, if I’m not mistaken, was ordered by the terrateniente Miguel Facussé, after the peasant organization MUCA had made a massive occupation and road block in front of his Exportadora del Atlántico [palm oil] extracting mill. This occupation began on June 6, 2009 at 1:00 a.m.... [and] took place after we researched how it was that he came into legal possession of agrarian reform lands... We discovered that he had acquired some of his lands illegally and that he has acquired the lands through trickery from former cooperative members who used to own the land ... We remained resisting in the occupation of the extracting mill for another 10 days. On the Tuesday 16 of June, Mel Zelaya came to Tocoa and met with the peasants of MUCA; and in that meeting, Manuel Zelaya Rosales promised that the agrarian reform lands in the Bajo Aguán would be returned to the peasants. This was the vile sin that Mel committed; wanting to help the impoverished people of his country [and why he was toppled in the coup].

During my stay in the Aguán I often heard similar interpretations of the coup. These accounts combined what had happened on June 28 with other elements of regional and national history, including the passing of the Agrarian Modernization Law in 1992 – which opened the legal floodgates that led to the counter reform – and the creation of the Bajo Aguán Colonization project (BAP) that began in the early 1970s. This presence of the past in people’s understanding of the present revealed a deeper vein that came to connect the current conflicts with a much broader political processes that included the dynamics of agrarian conflict. Also, the fact that the state, or more specifically the government, had such a salient presence in these narratives spoke of the close, but not necessarily evident relation that people felt linked agrarian structure (or conflict) and political power to the production of their current reality.

5 I will expand on Facussé’s ignominy in chapter 3.
This work is a case study of the Bajo Aguán (or Lower Aguán) region in the Honduran north coast. The Bajo Aguán, the lower section of the Aguán River basin, is a valley of fertile alluvial lands that extends for over 200,000 hectares (Jones 1985:140). Traditionally seen as an “empty” space, it would not be until the 1920s and 30s that the Honduran government paid any attention to the region, as extensive sections of land were given to the Truxillo Railroad

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6 When the full watershed is taken into account, its dimensions extend to over a million hectares (Jones 1985).
Company – a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company (UFCO) – for the creation of banana plantations. By the late 1940s, as a result of the spread of Panama disease, a banana blight, the company had completely pulled out of the region (Soluri 2009), leaving behind scattered settlements of former railroad and plantation workers, as well as Salvadoran immigrants and Garifuna communities (Casolo 2009). During the 1960s-70s the region became the home of the Bajo Aguán Project (BAP); a colonization scheme and the central piece of the Honduran agrarian reform (Posas 1981), which included the creation of over 150 peasant cooperatives that became the nucleus of the strongest peasant movement in Central America (Kay 1998; Edelman 1998). Later, in the 1990s, the Bajo Aguán became the country’s “capital of the agrarian counter reform” (Macías 2001), as more than 70 percent of the land distributed within the BAP was sold to a handful of large landowners (including Facussé, Canales and Morales). Later, it became the home of a set of massive land occupations in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (Kerssen 2013; Falla 2000); and has turned in the last few years into the site of an escalating agrarian conflicts pitting peasant communities against state and private security forces (Boyer 2010; Kerssen 2013; Ríos 2014).

My aim is to interrogate the intersection between agrarian conflict and political power in Honduras, through an in-depth ethnographic and historical account of the Aguán. To do so, I explore how the state “…comes into being as a structuration within political practice…” (Abrams 1988:82) and how the traces left by these processes in the memories of the people of the Aguán, inform their understanding of the region today. I use three distinct but interconnected entry points into the subject. First, I briefly sketch the country’s political history, paying close attention to the “problematic of hegemony” (Crehan 1997). Second, I focus on the introduction and consolidation of the palm oil industry in the Aguán region, with the aim of shedding light on the concrete forms in which these intersections between political power and agrarian conflict took place and articulated on the ground and which, following Michael Watts (2012), I call the palm oil assemblage. Finally, I examine the different ways in which memories are transmitted,
circulate and gain traction within the region, to try and understand how the past inhabits the present and informs or gives particular understandings of the actions and realities – the ways of being in the world – of the peasant organizations and communities in the region.

In what is left of this introduction, I will briefly discuss each of these nodes or entry points (the hegemony problematic; the palm oil assemblage; and memory) to frame the general approach and questions that guide this project, as well as outlining the contents of the different chapters.

**The hegemonic problematic: labor capture and passive revolution**

In any society different groups and individuals must be located among and relate to each other in particular ways. These locations are both material – in the sense of actual metabolic relations with their environment – as well as subjective – in the sense of the forms in which reality is understood and interpreted. In societies were capitalism is dominant, these relations are mainly organized around the production of commodities for the market. For this to happen, labor power must be accumulated and deployed in particular forms. However, labor is not simply lying around for the would-be capitalist to simply take it; it must be manufactured. For this to happen, would-be workers must be stripped of at least some proportion of their ability to engage in self-provisioning and thus, be forced to work for others. Nonetheless, this is not enough, as the “freed” individuals, must also be willing and able to work for others; they must be made into workers. These two elements combined is what we usually understand as primitive accumulation (Marx 1993; Federici 2004; De Angelis 2004). However, provisions must also be made to “bride” or anchor this labor (Moulier-Boutang 2006) – both socially and geographically –, in the sense of making sure that it stays put and available to work and avoid its
flight. These two elements combined – primitive accumulation and labor bridling – are what I understand as labor capture.\footnote{There are evident similarities between my understanding of “labor capture” and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (2003) notion of the “Apparatus of Capture,” as presented in \textit{1,000 Plateaus}. However, as it should soon become evident, the broader theoretical framework in which I deploy it differs significantly from the one presented by the Frenchmen.}

The particular forms and mechanisms by which labor is captured in different places are highly contingent. They depend on the particular history and geography of the setting, including the forms of organization and political practice and domination already in place, the relations of production, gender and kinship dynamics and ideologies (Stoler 1995; Gidwani 2008a; Burawoy 1979; Mintz 1985), among others. Further, labor capture is never done, it must constantly be reenacted: potential labor might decide to flee and move outside the purview of state and capital (Clastres 1989; Scott 2009); it might organize politically and try to protect or pry away further control over its subsistence (Striffler 1997); or quite simply, the amounts of “freed” potential labor may be far greater than the work needed and thus, left to care for itself (Li 2010), starting the process anew somewhere else. Also, as we will see in the next two chapters, the process of capture is deeply gendered, as men and women experience the penetration of capitalist relations and monetization in different ways (Mackintosh 1989a; Crehan 1997; Mies 1986).

This high contingency and the constant tensions produced by these processes of capture and flight create a situation in which political domination and economic exploitation are constantly negotiated and disrupted. Following Kate Crehan (1997:25), I understand this dynamic and space of political contestation as a “problematic of hegemony.” As Crehan argues, there has been a tendency by much of the literature that deals with the Gramscian notion of hegemony to limit or water it down to how the world is described and consensus is produced; what she terms “Hegemony Lite” (Crehan 2002:172). For her rather,
Hegemony is also very much about real material forces, embodied in institutions like schools, churches, and the media, which both bring into being specific landscapes of power and mold the individual subjectivities that feel at home in those landscapes. Hegemony, as it were, focuses attention on the complex, and two-way, passage between the economic and the political. (Crehan 1997:25)

Within this approach, and in general in modern capitalist societies, these struggles over hegemony necessarily hark back to the notion of the state. This is not the place to develop an extended discussion of what the state is or is not, as there are various works that deal with this issue from an anthropological perspective (see for example Das and Poole 2004; Sharma and Gupta 2009; Trouillot 2001). I will settle with some basic cues from which to enter the relation between the problematic of hegemony and the state.

In his hugely influential article on the difficulties of studying the state, Philip Abrams (1988) argues that we should stop thinking about the state as a “thing” or an object of study. Rather, for him, our focus should be on the concrete set of institutions that are created to enact the dynamics of domination, as well as the ways in which the idea of the state, as a homogeneous, ever-present and all mighty subject, is created and reproduced. Also, towards the end of the article, he presents the argument that “[t]he state comes into being as a structuration within political practice: it starts its life as an implicit construct: it is then reified ... and acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice” (1988:82).

In his own work on the formation of the Italian state during the Risorgimento, Gramsci (1971) comes to the conclusion that unlike France where the Jacobins had managed to bring together the city and the countryside and sweep away the old regime and create a new society, in Italy the bourgeoisie never managed to lead all of the country and its consolidation of power was more the result of the international context and a set of compromises with the old elites. Thus,

...restoration becomes the first policy whereby social struggles find sufficiently elastic frameworks to allow the bourgeoisie to gain power without dramatic upheavals, without the French machinery of terror. The old feudal classes are demoted from their dominant position to a "governing" one, but are not eliminated, nor is there any attempt to liquidate them as an organic
whole; instead of a class they become a "caste" with specific cultural and psychological characteristics, but no longer with predominant economic functions. (1975: 115)

The result is an uneven patchwork of different overlapping and coexisting social formations, dominant elite groups and forms of articulation with the international market. For Gramsci(1978), the differentiation between the Italian industrial north and the agrarian south characterized by him in the Southern Question was the most dramatic expression of this unevenness.

Generically understood as a “passive revolution,” this approach has been fruitfully used to explore the process of capitalist state formation in both the European periphery (Davidson 2010) and the postcolonial global south (Morton 2003; Morton 2013a; Chaudhuri 1988; Chatterjee 1988). As Adam David Morton (2013b:53) reminds us, “[t]he process is not literally ‘passive’ but refers to the attempt at ‘revolution’ through state intervention, or the inclusion of new social groups within the hegemony of a political order, without an expansion of mass producer control over politics.”

In the next chapter, I combine the passive revolution approach, applying certain elements of Kalyan Sanyal’s (2013) critique of its use for the Indian case, with the discussion of labor capture, to explore and characterize the process of transformation of the Honduran state – of the problematic of hegemony more broadly – in the postcolonial period; from its independence in 1821 to the coup of 1972 that inaugurated the period of “military reformism” (Sieder 1995).

The palm oil assemblage

One of the overarching elements that I have found in the political economic history of Honduras is the ever-so-present gap between the imagined natural riches that the country harbors and the persistent inability of Hondurans to exploit and enjoy this wealth. As in most of Latin America, this wealth has traditionally been linked to either mineral or agricultural primary exports and a series of boom and bust cycles affecting different industries controlled mainly by foreign capital.
and on which the dreams of the nation’s progress centered (Coronil 1997; Bulmer-Thomas 2003). Seen in broader terms, this progress, and after 1945 development, speaks to the ever-present attempts by Latin American elites – and nations more generally – to make the big jump and “catch up” with the Global North. However, as dependency theorists demonstrated decades ago, development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin (Frank 1966; Cardoso and Faletto 1979); or as Aníbal Quijano (2000) would have it, what develops are not countries but a global pattern of domination and distribution of power.

One of the characteristics of this type of peripheral capitalist accumulation, is the reliance on rent capture as the main mechanism of profit (Amin 2010; Coronil 1997). As I have been arguing, the problematic of hegemony is not only about political or ideological domination, but also of the articulations between the political and economic in particular settings. These two elements together – the centrality of rent capture and hegemony at the crux of the political and the economic – point to how the history of these crops and their articulation to the global market, cannot be understood simply as a result of ecological conditions or economic reasoning (Soluri 2009; Rogers 2010; Galt 2014; Grossman 1998). Politics and the art of hegemony are always also at the center. For example, James Scott (1998:2) in the introduction to Seeing Like a State asks “[h]ow did the state gradually get a handle on its subjects and their environment?” And he in part responds by asserting that “[w]hatever their other purposes, the designs of scientific forestry and agriculture and the layouts of plantations, collective farms... all seemed calculated to make the terrain, its products, and its workforce more legible – and hence manipulable – from above and from the center.”

Here we can see clearly how agriculture is at the crux of political power and economy and of how in the history of its industrialization, we can envision the threads that link the state with sedentary agriculture and those that link labor capture with the centralization of power and its institutionalization (Clastres 1989). It would seem that Vandana Shiva (1993) is right when she
argues that monocultures have more to do with social control and political domination than with agriculture.

I argue in this dissertation that one can see the history of the problematic of hegemony in the Aguán by looking at the history of the introduction and development of the palm oil industry. Even when little of the production and profit of the industry remains in the region, the Aguán is saturated by palm oil. While money is pumped out of the region in the form of rent, palm oil clogs its everyday life, with its landscape of infinite rows of symmetrically placed palm trees and the smell of the black fumes discharged from the various extracting mills. The crop is also intertwined with how the region understands and identifies itself. The city of Tocoa – the largest in the region – is known as the “city of palms;” its football team’s emblem has two oil palms as its center and every year the city hosts a festival to celebrate “palm culture.”

Although it places different social groups in different positions, the centrality of the oil palm knows no class boundaries. Just as the same large corporations install large plantations, poor peasant families plant a few palm trees in their backyards. A significant part of the current expansion of the crop in the Aguán – close to 80,000 hectares in 2013 – has not necessarily been done by large entrepreneurs, but by peasant individuals and peasant collective enterprises.

To understand how palm oil acquired such a central position in the region, I would argue that we need to look at processes happening in different scales and under different temporalities. On the one hand, it has to do with the ways in which the past inhabits the present. For many of these poor peasant families and organizations, oil palms are emblematic of the wellbeing and prestige that came with the creation of a set of palm oil producing cash cropping peasant cooperatives in the 1970s as part of the BAP, as we will see in chapters 2 and 3.

However, at the same time, we have to understand the introduction of the industry in the country parallels the efforts made since the 1940s by the U.S. banana companies (particularly United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company) to diversify their production and find a viable alternative to their Panama disease-riddled plantations. Also, as Gilberto Ríos (2014:166)
points out, “the increase in the cultivation of African palm is due to the rise in the prices in the domestic market, by an estimated average of $174 /ton; a significant increment in relation to the 1990s, where there were years when the prices barely reached $26.50 /ton for the producer.”

On the other hand, it has to do with the dreams and projects for the future that are harbored in the present. For example, the newly elected president Juan Orlando Hernández proposed during his campaign to increase the country’s oil palm area by 150,000 hectares to, to reach a staggering extension of over 400,000 hectares, thus catching up with Colombia, the largest producer in Latin America. To do so, the government is committing around $50 million of the 2014 national budget to the expansion of the crop (La Tribuna 2014). It is clear that the elites view the palm oil industry as key to the development of the country.

In both cases – the past and future in the present – the national tale of the palm oil industry must be read against the background of the rise of this crop as a global commodity and the quintessential “flex crop” (Borras et al. 2012). According to the website Oil World (oilworld.biz), for 2012, palm oil represented 55.5 percent of the world consumption of vegetable oils and fats, with a consumption 52.1 million tons, followed by soybeans with 41.7 million tons. However, palm oil has many other uses besides the food industry; ranging from the cosmetic industry to the expansion of the so-called “bio” or agro fuels. This flexibility makes palm oil a very attractive industry, as it is hard to imagine a significant drop in prices when the tendency is towards an increasing demand and producers and refiners can potentially sell to several different kinds of end-users.

To try to come to grips and articulate these different levels of analysis, I draw upon Michael Watts’ (2012) understanding of the “oil assemblage.” Watts proposes that we approach

8 The difference of scales within the industry becomes quite evident when we compare this numbers with those of Malaysia and Indonesia, which dedicate an estimated 4.6 million and 9.4 million of hectares respectively to the crop. To put this in context, Honduras’ total territory is only a little over 11 million hectares.
the petroleum industry as a global network that links, through a set of shared principles and forms or organization, the different sites of production, distribution and consumption of oil. In Chapter 3 I draw upon this notion to characterize the palm oil assemblage. However, unlike Watts, who is more interested in looking at the articulation of these different sites from a global perspective, I focus more on how the palm oil industry took concrete form and has been lived by the different groups involved in the Aguán region.

In theoretical and methodological terms, I focus on the history of the palm oil industry in the region – and its tensions with other scales such as the national and the global – as a way of exploring the ways in which struggles over hegemony took place on the ground. I am interested in the processes by which a group of landless or land-poor peasant families migrated from different parts of the country to eventually become either palm oil producers in the peasant cooperatives that were created during the BAP in the 1970s; day laborers in the large palm oil plantations that were installed in the lands sold by many of those cooperatives; or members of various impoverished peasant collective enterprises, which currently struggle for survival and peg their dreams of a better future on entering the industry as palm oil producers. Crucial for my interests is questioning and shedding some light in the ways in which these peasant men and women experienced, remember and were positioned in regard to these processes.

Memory as entry point

The historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States...

The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success...Every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian. Consequently, this kind of history can only be dealt with monographically, and each monograph requires an immense quantity of material which is often hard to collect.

It has been mainly from the threads of memories that the fabric of this dissertation has been weaved. The decision to build research upon these weaves had to do both with an empirical necessity and a methodological decision. Empirically, it grew out of the limited number of primary and secondary sources that could be found. In terms of secondary sources, although the Aguán is recognized as the centerpiece of what was probably the most extensive agrarian reform in Central America, very few in depth studies deal with it either directly (Salgado 1994; Macías 2001; Castro 1994; Kerssen 2013) or indirectly (Soluri 2009). Also, most of these focus on the institutional and more overarching transformation and with a short historical scope that begins in the 1970s with the creation of the BAP, leaving aside both the dwellers present before the arrival of the cooperatives and the subjective experiences of the more recent migrants.

For primary sources, the situation is not much different. During the 1990s, for example, as the country’s agrarian policy moved towards more liberal positions, the National Agrarian Institute (INA) began to discard most of its archives and library under the idea that they would no longer be needed. In this process, most of the documents on the BAP and the agrarian reform were lost. Also, although in Honduras one finds strong regional identities and the country in the last decades has gone through a process of municipal political regionalization, most of the available statistical data is for the national level.

Just as Jeffrey Gould and Aldo Lauria-Santiago (2009:xiv) argue for the Salvadoran case, I believe that “...when confronted by the paucity of documentary materials that would allow us to reconstruct ethnographically thick descriptions... testimonies can be employed to approximate sociological and ethnographic realities in the past.” Also, following their lead, I use “...a methodology based on mutual interrogation of oral and written sources and a continuous cross-referencing between the two, moving from the micro and regional level to the national level of analysis.”

In practical terms, this means that in those cases in which no regionally specific information could be found, I relied on sources for other locations and scales, in an attempt to
create connections from which to pose questions and approach my own data. Also, when possible, I collected and used alternative sources, such as conference minutes, personal archives of peasant leaders and legal reports. However in general these sources were scant and hard to find.

Methodologically, following Alessandro Portelli (1997:146), I understand that working with memories deals more with representations than with facts, understood in more traditional ways. However, “[r]epresentations and facts do not exist in separate spheres. Representations work on facts and claim to be facts.” This tension between representations and facts is at the crux of oral history. According to Portelli, it is precisely the task of the oral historian to explore what happened (the facts) while also understanding at the same time how people remember and organize their understanding and decide to act in relation to those memories (representations): “[o]ral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (Portelli 2010:50). Thus oral sources, memories in this case, are a privileged window into the subjectivity of the people involved, allowing us to shed some light on the forms in which historical and structural processes are lived, understood and acted upon.

According to David Berliner (2005: 198), the last decade or so has seen a proliferation – a “boom” as he calls it – in the anthropological study of memory. However, according to him, with this proliferation also comes a “...process of conceptual extension leading to the entanglement of memory and culture...” where, “...memory gradually becomes everything which is transmitted across generations... ‘almost indistinguishable’ then from the concept of culture itself.”

9 “The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non hegemonic classes” (Portelli 2010:50).
Understood in these terms, the forms of narration and temporality become crucial in the study of memories – particularly in terms of untangling individual from collective memories. Regarding the former, “[t]he organization of the narrative reveals a great deal of the speakers’ relationship to their history.” In this sense, Portelli (2010:70) proposes three main levels on which memories tend to be organized:

Institutional: the sphere of politics, government, parties, unions, and elections; the national and international historical context; and ideology. Space referent: the nation and the world.

Collective: the life of the community, the neighborhood, and the workplace; strikes, natural catastrophes, and rituals; and collective participation in “institutional” episodes. Space referent: the town, the neighborhood, and the workplace.

Personal: private and family life; the life cycle of births, marriages, jobs, children, and deaths; and personal involvement in the two other levels. Space referent: the home.

The idea is that the placing of different events in one of the levels may reveal more about the speaker’s perspective than about the event itself. It speaks of the narrator’s interests, but also shows the ever-present tension between individual and the eventual institutionalization of collective memories. This point is important.

According to Portelli:

Like all human activities, memory is social and may be shared... however ... it only materializes in individual recollections and speech acts. It becomes collective memory only when it is abstracted and detached from the individual: in myth and folklore (one story for many people...), in delegation (one person for many stories...), in institutions (abstract subjects—school, church, State Party) that organize memories and rituals into a whole other than the sum of its separate parts. (1997:157)

Thus, collective memory should not be understood as homogeneous or unproblematic, but rather as the result – unstable and constantly disputed – of a political struggle in which particular individual and sometimes shared memories and experiences coalesce – become institutionalized – in detriment of others. In this way, the study of collective memories should focus on the ways in which this institutionalization takes place and how these collective
memories circulate. Phrased differently, I place significant “...emphasis on the political
mediation of memory [as] an essential complement to the usual focus on the narrative and
social mediation of memory and history...” (Kligman and Verdery 2011:14)

As I see it, exploring these political mediations of memory is at the crux of the
contradiction between “dominant” and “subaltern” histories that Gramsci presents in the
epigraph that opens this section. It is not only that dominant histories and memories are easier
to access – as they tend to appear in history books and the media –, but also that they tend to
show a manufactured homogeneity that papers over many of the political mediations that were
part of the initial process of institutionalization. In the case of subaltern histories and memories
this situation also holds, but with a twist. Their modes of presentation and sometimes even their
content are – as Gramsci mentions – “necessarily fragmented and episodic.” This becomes both
a challenge – as it is harder to reconstruct fully fledged historical narratives, – and an
opportunity – as the challenging and conflicting forms of political mediation become that much
more evident.

As Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery (2011:14–15) claim in their study regarding the
process of collectivization of agriculture in Communist-era Romania,

Rather than seeing the new historiography [resulting from the use of new sources
such as oral ones] as uncovering the “truth” about the past... we see it as part of a
process of recovering and reconstructing usable pasts –plural because of the
widely divergent interpretations... that are competing for the power both to
reclaim and to rewrite history.

Turning now to the temporal aspect of memories, it is important to remember that
necessarily “...the past does not exist independently from the present” and “[i]n that sense, the
past has not content.” (Trouillot 1995:15) Thus remembering is about the presence of the past in
the present; in other words, that remembering is always a present act and people’s “...
constitution as subjects goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past. As such,
they do not succeed such a past: they are its contemporaries.” (p. 16). Or as Walter Benjamin
(1968:261) would have it in his XIV thesis on the philosophy of history: “[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.”

History is as much a process of narrative creation as it is a process of the production of silences (Trouillot 1995). This tension between what is narrated and what is silenced is necessarily an active political process in which the historical existence of certain subaltern groups – or certain individuals within those groups – is effaced from dominant historical narratives. From this perspective, the recuperation of memories of particular groups can also be seen as a process of recovering those denied and silenced histories.

Just as the narratives of the coup have tended to efface and render invisible the experience of those dwelling in the Aguán, the narratives about the BAP have tended to deny the history of those people who already dwelled in the region beforehand, as well as the histories of migration that led those families from their homes in other parts of the country. Similarly, many historical narratives about the sale of the agrarian reform cooperatives renders invisible, and thus denies, the experience of women in the process. By focusing on the memories of these men and women, I hope to present at least a part of this experience that has been denied and suppressed. Always remembering that

The play of power in the production of alternative narratives begins with the joint creation of facts and sources for at least two reasons. First, facts are never meaningless: indeed, they become facts only because they matter in some sense, however minimal. Second, facts are not created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences. (Trouillot 1995:29)

Sources and facts are never neutral. They are always created within broader political and social contexts. This is particularly important when working with people’s testimonies, where the shift in the broader context can change the combination between what is said and what is silenced. I carried out my fieldwork (see the description below) in a period framed between the upcoming national elections of November 2014 and the still very raw and pervasive presence of
the 2009 coup. Just how much this context affected the testimonies collected is hard to determine. However, in my conversations, the topics of the elections and the coup were unavoidable. At times it felt that narrating people’s past was a way for them of looking for clues that would allow them to better understand their current situation. Further, due to the high levels of violence and political repression present in the region at the moment, some people were reluctant to speak with me, fearing that I might be an agent of the military or even the CIA. Thus, there is much of this historical context, and the particular way I was positioned by the people I interviewed, in the facts and sources that I used.

Also, as Kligman and Verdery (2011) are quick to point out, there are certain elements besides context – age, gender, class position, education level, among others – that also shape the encounter between interviewer and interviewee. For example, in my fieldwork, men were quicker to talk and more willing to have their interviews recorded than women. Also, it took me a longer time – and many failed attempts at learning to make tortillas – for many women to finally open up and tell me their stories. In the end, some of the richer testimonies that I collected came from women and my focus on the relation between dispossession and gender came as much from my interest in the topic as from their implicit mandate that I tell their side of the story.

Taking these elements into account, I treated each source and the data collected, as a set of fragments that needed to constantly be mended, reconnected and reconstructed in the face of any new element found. I constantly tried to triangulate my information, by contrasting the narratives collected with the meager written sources. In methodological terms this meant focusing more in the relations between sources and facts – and the particular social and political contexts in which they are inscribed – than on the sources themselves.

**Description of fieldwork**

I spent over ten months in the Aguán during 2013 and about a month more during 2012. During this time, I divided my time between the city of Tocoa and five peasant settlements in the region
that had formed during the wave of land occupations that had taken place since 2000 on both banks of the Aguán River. In addition to visiting these communities, I took part in the meetings and activities of the Permanent Observatory of Human Rights of the Aguán (OPDH), which was created in 2011 as a result of the escalating violence in the region in the aftermath of the coup. I also interviewed members of the local institutions, such as the Catholic Church and the military, as well as members of some of the older palm oil producing peasant cooperatives that were created during the BAP period.

In terms of techniques, besides the more traditional activities, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, I carried out around ten memory workshops in three of the five peasant settlements. The design of these workshops was inspired by Pilar Riaño’s (2006; 2000a) work with displaced communities in Colombia, but I made some changes to adapt her approach to Honduran realities. According to her, a memory workshop consists of a group session in which participants engaged in a series of interactive activities. Each individual participated in telling stories and evoking memories, in the elaboration of maps, photo albums, or visual biographies, and in the discussion and reflection on their past memories and the ‘politics’ of remembering. (Riaño-Alcalá 2000b:40)

Through a set of participatory activities aimed at stimulating collective forms of remembering, these workshops had the objective of locating those traces from the past that linger in the present and inform much of the communities’ understanding of the present. The basic methodological idea behind these workshops is that they become spaces of collective knowledge production in which the interactions themselves are the starting point of the elaboration.\footnote{Riaño (2000b:40) describes how in her fieldwork, there has been much discussion regarding the differences and tensions that exist between individual and collective memories (Halbwachs 1992) and the tendency within social sciences to collapse them both into the same thing (Kansteiner 2002). As I mentioned before, I try to move away from this problems by focusing in the ways in which memories become institutionalized and circulate. In methodological terms, my approach was to build up to the workshops by interviewing individually most of the people that would...}
...an individual story became a trigger of many other stories and of an active sensorial and emotional exchange. Each story deepened individual and group reflections and brought back forgotten memories or other experiences lived by the participants and with this is a collective conversation emerged from the ‘historical dust’ became the centre of a lively group exchange and of the ways each group re-created their individual and collective memories.

Due in part to the significant amount of scholarly work written on the topics of displacement and violence in Colombia, Riaño decided to concentrate on what she calls the “anthropology of remembering.” This meant that her focus was not so much in recovering and reconstructing the histories of the people involved in the workshops, but rather, in the forms and politics of the process of remembering itself. However, similar methodological approaches – rooted in Orlando Fals-Borda’s (1984) branch of Participatory Action Research – have been used effectively in Colombia to recover and give evidence of the massacres and forced displacement that various groups in the country have suffered (see for example, Bello 2006; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010; Jimeno, Varela, and Castillo 2012). In these cases, memory workshops are used to register the ways in which these human rights violations were remembered by those whose experience was either openly denied by state officials, or quite simply ignored. The information collected in the workshops was then combined with other analytical registers – such as in-depth interviews, archival work, among others – to reconstruct particular events and historical conjunctures. The idea behind this is that remembering and narrating a conflict is the first step in a long process that can eventually lead to some sort of recognition and reparations by the state.

participate in them. In this way I could contrast the individual testimonies with the collective elaborations in the workshops.

11 It is important to add that Pilar Riaño has played an important role in the methodological development of some of these approaches. Also it is important to point out that here I only reference literature that focuses on the Colombian experience, as it is the one that I am more familiar with and has been more influential in my own work. However, similar types of work can be found in contexts such as the Mexican south or in the struggles for reparations in post-civil war Guatemala.
I would argue that this type of methodological approach – combining the collective memory elaboration in the workshops with the recollection of individual testimonies and other written sources – can be particularly useful in contexts such as the Aguán, where little secondary information can be found and where grievances from the past have such a vibrant (collective) presence in the present.

In my own fieldwork, a typical workshop would be carried out with no more than ten members of one of the peasant movements that I worked with (see chapter 5). When possible, I would organize a session with only men, another with only women and a final mixed one with current and former leaders of the organization. My aim was to create differentiated spaces to see if there was a single homogeneous narrative of their plights, or rather if they were differentiated along lines of gender (Schraut and Paletschek 2008; Hirsch and Smith 2002), age (Griffin 2004) and organizational position, as much of the literature suggests.

Giving a full account of the specific techniques and dynamics developed in the workshops goes beyond the scope of this introduction. I would just like to point out the centrality that creating collective timelines of the peasant movements had in these spaces. Regarding the collective timelines (see figures 2 and 3 for examples), the idea was to bring together the knowledge and perspective that different members of the movement had regarding their own history and systematize it in a graphical manner. This activity tended to create great discussions regarding particular dates and locations of events, names of people involved and the effects that these events had (or had not had) on the organization. This became a particularly fertile window into the internal tensions of the organizations, but also into the always conflictual process of making sense of historical processes and creating coherent narratives.

12 For a detailed account of the specific techniques used in these workshops, see Machado et al. (2009).
Figure 2. Memory workshop: collective timeline of the peasant movements of the Aguán
Also, following Gastón Gordillo’s (2004) insight that memories are always spatialized, I did various walking tours with members of the community, in which they would show me what they considered to be important places in the history of their settlement. Every time that we
arrived at one such place, we would stop for a while and have a conversation regarding why it was an important place and which memories were attached to it.

**Figure 4. Memory workshop: community maps of the Luzón Palmeras Peasant Movement**

Both maps depict the Unidos Lucharemos settlement, home of the Luzón Palmeras Peasant Movements. The one on the left was drawn by women, the one on the right by men. We can see significant differences in the ways both depict their community.
In combination with these walks, I was able to carry out three participatory mapping workshops in which members of a community would draw sketched maps of their settlements, locating their current conflicts and problems, as well as the different actors present. With the support of the San Alonso Rodríguez Foundation (FSAR) and the OPDH, I was also able to carry out a regional participatory mapping workshop with representatives of ten of the 22 peasant organizations that take part in the Observatory. During this workshop we again utilized the techniques of participatory mapping to locate the different dynamics currently taking place in the region.

**Outline of the chapters**

Summarizing, this dissertation explores the process of creation of the Aguán region from the perspective of a set of families that migrated towards the north coast from the 1970s onwards, in search of a better present and future. It asks about the processes by which the region went from “empty” space in the 1960s, to centerpiece of the Honduran palm oil industry in the 2000s and site of one of the most intense agrarian conflicts in Latin America at the same time (Edelman and León 2013). Also, by looking at the history of the palm oil industry in the Aguán, it sheds light on the ways in which the Honduran problematic of hegemony took place in a concrete place. Further, it shows how this region became one of the most conflictive places in the country in the run up to the 2009 coup. Finally, by focusing on various individual and collective memories and historical narratives in the region, it explores the ways in which these processes have been experienced and lived by a set of poor peasant families.

The analysis is organized into five chapters. In chapter 1, I briefly outline an agrarian history of the country from its independence in 1821 to the 1972 coup and the formal rise to power of the military. Chapter 2 focusses on the individual memories of migration of various peasant families that left their home towns back in the country’s west in search of a better life in the north coast. Here, I begin to differentiate between the experiences of those families that arrived to the Aguán as part of the BAP and settled in the valley (the lowlands), and those that
arrived outside of the colonization scheme and settled in the surrounding hills. Also, I briefly analyze the BAP and how the region was before the arrival of the first cooperatives in the 1970s.

Chapter 3 explores the creation of the palm oil industry in the region. It focuses on the introduction of the crop and how it functioned during the BAP period. Also, it questions the more traditional interpretations of the process of agrarian counter reform of the 1990s, as these focus only on the organizational weaknesses of the cooperatives, without taking into account the processes of differentiation between and within the cooperatives, which were due mainly the forms of rent capture. Finally, it tries to recover women’s experience of the process of selling the agrarian reform lands, as this is one of the key dimensions that is usually effaced in the more conventional narratives.

Chapter 4 centers on the role of the Catholic Church in the region, particularly in the years prior to and in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in late 1998. More than the work of the church itself, the chapter explores the ways in which it helped create and organize a historical narrative regarding the reality of the region. In the aftermath of Mitch, this narrative became especially important in understanding how Aguán residents came to view the reconstruction process and the necessity of re-launching an agrarian reform from below as response to the broader processes of dispossession in the region.

Chapter 5 covers the period between 2000 and 2009 and the experience of three peasant movements that were born in the aftermath of Mitch: the Peasant Movement of Rigores (MCR), the Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MCA), and the Authentic Reclaiming Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MARCA). While the first two are movements created by peasants that before Mitch used to dwell in the surrounding hills, MARCA is the result of a set of former cooperative members who organized to recover what they deemed had been taken away illegally. I argue that this difference in composition had significant effects on their trajectories, but that in the end the palm oil industry overdetermines the region and thus, it is difficult to think about the current (and future) situation, without thinking about the monoculture.
In the conclusion, using the aftermath of the 2009 coup as setting, I propose that we think about the history of the Aguán as a braid composed of four differentiated, but interconnected, strands related to the main arguments of this study: 1. The perspective of passive revolution to approach the process of state formation in postcolonial Central America; 2. The tension between labor capture and flight as a way of approaching the topic of agrarian reform, in the midst of different processes of dispossession and struggle; 3. The consolidation on the ground of the global palm oil assemblage and the move to the center of the region’s life of oil palm monoculture and; 4. The process of creation of historical narratives in the Aguán, as the tension between individual and collective memories.
Chapter 1. Outlining an agrarian history of the Honduran state (1821-1972)

So wonderful are the reports about this particular province, that even allowing largely for exaggeration, it will exceed Mexico in riches, and equal it in largeness of its towns and villages, the density of its population, and the policy of its inhabitants.

Hernán Cortés (2009:118) to the Emperor Charles V, regarding the lands close to the town of Trujillo

The desert has favored the idle and the mountain’s guerrilla. The desert annoys and kills. Let us foment immigration that brings capital, work, and industry. *Gobernar es poblar* [to govern is to populate]; this is the administrative axiom that the Latin American nations recognized today.

Ramón Rosas, 1872 (quoted by Del Cid 1988)

I came to that conclusion because the hard knocks of life hurt, nobody likes poverty. And Honduras has the wealth to sustain itself, by itself, without aid from the North Americans, without aid of the Germans, without aid from any country of the world… In Honduras there is oil, in Honduras there is gold, there are emeralds and silver.

Javier, peasant currently living in the Aguán

Since it was first “discovered” in 1502 by Christopher Columbus himself, the territory that we now know as Honduras, already inhabited by indigenous peoples, has been greedily eyed as a place of great potential riches. For example, Robert Chamberlain (1966:9) describes how the Italian admiral, upon arriving at one of the Bay Islands just north of the Honduran coast, encountered a large Indian trading canoe, where

[t]he natives were dressed in excellently woven cotton, and the canoe carried well wrought articles which figured in the highly developed trade in the region, including axes and other utensils of copper and pottery. The appearance of this canoe brightened Columbus’ hopes that the rich and populous lands which he sought were near.

However, the chances of exploiting this potential, and converting Honduras’ natural resources into material riches, seem to forever remain out of reach. There has always been a “lack,” something missing, which has made it impossible for Honduras to live up to its potential. This gap between perceived and unrealized potential has changed throughout time – from
“progress” to “development” —, but always with the haunting persistence of pervasive poverty and lack of material development. This has led both politicians and analysts — whether Hondurans or foreigners— to constantly probe into the nature of this lack and more often than not come to the conclusion that it is a political problem that should be solved by and from the state — as the Rosas quotation at the beginning of this chapter so vividly suggests.

This way of posing the problem — and it is important to remember that it is not unique to Honduras — points to the close, but not necessarily always evident relationship that exists between agrarian structure — understood very broadly as the forms of access to and control of land and natural resources — and political power (Moore 1966). The forms in which this lack has been understood and acted upon provide an excellent vantage point for exploring how the political tensions generated by the many attempts at placing particular groups in specific places to guarantee that this untapped nature would be utilized and that the eventual profits would flow in the right direction.

In what follows, I will analyze this process of structuration within political practice in Honduras by looking at how the gap between natural potential and actual economic reality became, as it were, the state question in Honduras. Further, following Antonio Gramsci’s (1971; Buci-Glucksmann 1980) notes on the state and hegemony, I will pay particular attention to the ways in which coercion and consent were articulated and sometimes equilibrated in different moments to shape the relations between dominant and subaltern groups in an effort — never entirely successful or complete — to create some sort of hegemony.

My objective in this chapter is to outline what I am calling an agrarian history of the Honduran state. Outlining, because rather than focusing much on detail, I try to present certain historical threads that follow and are integral for my arguments in the next chapter. Agrarian history, because more than a fully fleshed historical narrative, I focus on the agrarian dynamics of the country and particularly, on the forms of conflict that have arisen from the interlinked
and constitutive processes of labor capture and flight—processes that will be developed and
defined as we move along through the always messy history of Honduras.

**The myth of the rich but impoverished country and the colonial legacy**

The land and the people of a nation are its basic raw material. Honduras is fortunate in
its central location in relation to the remainder of the American republics and in its
extensive coast lines suitable for ports on both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Its
rough topography, on the other hand, has inhibited its social and economic
development in the past, and will continue to present expensive obstacles in the
future.

In its people, Honduras has assets as yet only partially developed; Disease,
malnutrition and lack of education have to be overcome before this human
resource can be fully utilized in the country's struggle to create the very environment
which can make health, an ample food supply, education, and the various other
material and cultural aspects of more advanced economies available to the people.

Vincent Checchi (1959), *Honduras: A Problem in Economic Development*

Since its discovery by Europeans, Honduras has been imagined as containing great
potential for the accumulation of riches, as the epigraph from Cortés indicates. However, at the
same time, no matter how much natural potential the country seemed to show, it was always all
but impossible to actually enjoy or exploit those riches. Time and time again, let it be the
conquistadors or the colonial authorities, the problem always had to do with a lack of enough
labor to exploit the land’s “natural” potential. This lack was both absolute and relative. In
absolute terms, it was due to the killing and enslavement of a significant proportion of the
indigenous population during a period of conquest that proved to be complex and bloody
(Chamberlain 1966; Newson 1986). Well informed of the deeds done by the Spanish
conquistadors in Mexico, the Honduran indigenous groups mounted a furious resistance that
included pitched battles, particularly in the western section of the country, and with hit and run
skirmishes, where the country's irregular and mountainous terrain became a great ally for flight,
but a relentless enemy for colonial control.

Regarding the relative lack of labor, it was not only that it was hard to find potential
labor due to population depletion, but that the indigenous groups that could be found were hard
to pin down, due to a combination of the country’s physical geography, the indigenous groups’ particular ways of living and the colonial massacre. In geographical terms, Honduras has very uneven and mountainous terrain, where fertile valleys are separated by steep hills and mountains and more than two-thirds of the country present slopes of 25 percent or more and around 80 percent of the country’s surface ranges between 600 and 1,250 meters above sea level. Also, according to Newson (1986:96), the groups that populated the country at the time of conquest, were “...a large number of independent Indian groups, who at best formed weak confederacies,” which in practice meant that in contrast to the Mexican or Peruvian cases, “…the Spanish could not achieve effective control through political alliances with a few native leaders, but had to conquer each group separately.” Further, “[n]o sooner had one group been pacified than it revolted.” (p. 96).

These elements – geographically fragmented territory, nomadic indigenous groups and bloody and complex conquest – combined to create a dynamic of intense spatial mobility by the subaltern groups – indigenous but also mestizo peasantry – that saw in the flight to the mountains a form of survival and social reproduction.¹³

There were of course regional differences to this pattern, which were shaped by the different combinations of physical geography, types of indigenous groups present and the forms in which the conquest transpired and the dynamics of domination during the colonial period. For example, Linda Newson (1986) shows that there were clear differentiations between the western part of the country, with larger concentrations of indigenous population and where Spanish rule was more stable; and the eastern section, where smaller and more mobile

¹³ Cortés continually encountered a problem throughout his trip to this part of Central America: in most of the cases, each time that he arrived at an indigenous community, he would find it empty and burnt to the ground, as the local inhabitants had decided to run off to the hills rather than face the Spanish visitors that they related with death, due to the information that they had most probably received from the Mexican experience (Cortés 2009; Barahona 2002).
indigenous groups were able to mount some sort of effective resistance during most of the period. When taken together, the combined effect of the two forms of lack of labor – relative and absolute – created a highly fragmented social formation, with very weak colonial institutions, which translated into a more lax system of domination system that could not fully resort to bear force to subdue and fix enough labor (Martínez Peláez 2011).

From the point of view of the dominant groups, this scarcity of labor was not only quantitative but also qualitative. The existing population lacked “industriousness” and preferred to run off into the hills rather than to settle down and work for others (Barahona 2002; Martínez Peláez 2011). These two elements – geographic demographic dispersion and lack of “industriousness” – tended to combine in a sort of lack that shackled the country and made it seemingly impossible to accumulate capital.

Thus, one of the greatest problems the elites faced during the colonial period, and one which continues after independence, was the tendency of the population to move away from the centers of production – like the mines in center of the country – and towards remote places, where they could grow maize and other subsistence crops. In this way,

[f]leeing to the mountains, so abundant in Honduras’s geography, became one of the particular forms of resistance that the indigenous communities used against Hispanic domination. For the Indians, this option meant the possibility of freedom due to transhumance, the return to nomadic culture, which disassociated them from the social body organized by the colonial power. (Barahona 2002:131)

This dynamic of fleeing from relations of labor exploitation did not disappear in 1821 with the independence of Honduras from Spain. For example, according to the Baron of Franzenstein, an Austrian intellectual who lived in Honduras during the first decades of the nineteenth century, referring specifically to the topic of land use:

... contrary to the Caucasian Europeans, who prefer large extensions of land for its exploitation, the Indians of Honduras look for a little piece of land where they establish a shanty [rancho] which can serve as a place of refuge for their laziness... The objective of the native farmers is not economic profit, but to have
enough maize and beans to satisfy their personal necessities. (quoted by Barahona 2002:52)

If for the elites this tendency of the subaltern groups to run off into the hills was seen with exasperation, for the subaltern groups it became a strategy of both survival and the search for some sort of freedom. At the crux of this conflict seemed to be the idea of subsistence agriculture. According to Pierre Clastres (1989:193), “[a]s a matter of fact, two axioms seem to have guided the advance of Western civilization from the outset: the first maintains that true societies unfold in the protective shadow of the State; the second states the categorical imperative: man must work.”

Running off to the hills negated a surplus that otherwise could be captured by the elites; thus the problem seemed to be who would enjoy the fruits of whose labor. In this way, the social formation that was inherited by the postcolonial Honduran state was deeply dysfunctional in terms of profit making and domination. With a geographically fragmented population, weak institutional structure and a peasantry – both indigenous and mestizo – with a deeply ingrained sense of “freedom,” the gap between the perceived and imagined natural potential of the country and the cold and hard reality was quite glaring.

Before exploring the forms in which this gap was framed and approached in the postcolonial period around the issue of labor accumulation and state formation, I will make a short digression to introduce the concept of labor capture, which is crucial for my later argument.

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14 See William Roseberry (1991) for an interesting discussion on how this imperative to work articulated with different labor regimes in Latin America around the incipient coffee industry in early 20th Century.

15 Another way of thinking about this problem is through the four “key questions” that Henry Bernstein (2010:22) proposes as central to a political economy approach: “Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it?”
**Labor capture**

Capital must compel living labor to act for capital, as capital, in order to reproduce and expand: even as workers, as bearers (Trager) of social relations that posit them as labor, strive with varying degrees of success to resist the incarceration of their capacities.

Vinay Gidwani (2008b:857), “*Capitalism’s Anxious Whole*”

Capital, understood as a social relation, is never a given; it must always be assembled. Accumulation for accumulation’s sake is always a complex and deeply contingent process in which different elements must be placed in particular situations, in particular space-times, for it to be successful. Human labor is necessarily at the center of this process. It is through labor that humans transform nature and in the process transform themselves. In societies where the capitalist mode of production prevails, the fruits of this labor (commodities) must be oriented towards exchange in the market and surplus labor must be alienated from its immediate owners – the workers – and accumulated by the owners of the means of production – the capitalists – in the form of money. Why? Because the dominant source of value in capitalist societies is found in human labor. Or, to phrase it in a different manner, “…value can be thought of as the name for how productive, social activities get divided up within societies, activities – labor; in its very broadest sense – that yield the assemblages of humans and nonhumans that are necessary to sustain life, as well as spark new life” (Henderson 2013:xii).

Seen from this vantage point, two questions become central. First, how are these “assemblages of humans and nonhumans” actually assembled in particular contexts and situations, so that surplus labor can be accumulated? Second, how is it that the diverse forms in which commodities are produced, are stitched together to give rise to capital in general – as global capitalist society as a whole? Both questions must be taken together, and particular attention must be placed on the movements between them. Commodities must be produced, distributed and consumed, only to begin the process anew in an expanded manner for capital to be accumulated; capital can be seen as value in motion. However, this is never a smooth trip,
...for value to expand, a phenomenon tantamount to the expansion of the realm of exchange values... it must pass, restlessly, through several phases. And, like any voyager, it faces the constant threat of an accident or breakdown (even death, absolute negation) that can bring the journey to an abrupt halt. (Gidwani 2008b:861)

The possibilities of these stoppages lurk everywhere in the process of capital accumulation. One of them – the one that we will be privileging here – resides exactly in the moment in which living labor has to be organized to produce commodities – with its double quality as use and exchange values. Through a Hegelian reading of Marx's *Grundrisse*, Vinay Gidwani (2008b:869) presents us with this picture of the production process:

Marx unpacks the process of production as a fraught space – time of non-circulation that capital must traverse before re-entering the realm of circulation. And it is in this domain outside circulation, where capital directly encounters the other it must subsume as its own moment if it is to continue to exist, that we are offered Grundrisse's new understanding of capitalism as a two-sided whole: value-for-itself (capital) pitted against use-value-for-itself (labor).

For capital accumulation to begin, living labor must be put to labor for other (the capitalist), but before it does, living labor is nothing but “...pure potentiality that has not yet become an instrument or raw material for capital; that has not as yet been captured and consumed for the production of value...” (p. 870); it is use-value-for-itself. This is a moment of friction in which nothing is given and everything is yet to be defined. Thus, the “...repeated and heterogeneous spatiotemporal encounters with labor... [are] a site of fear and anxiety,” where we find “... on the one side, capital’s desire to capture ‘living labor’ as use-value for itself and its permanent fear that labor could become otherwise; on the other side, he underscores labor’s desire to be otherwise and its fear that without capital it may not be able to remain active and reproduce.” (p. 874).

Willing labor is not already there for capital accumulation; it must be made willing, turned into a worker: it must be captured. In this sense, I understand the process of labor capture as the spatiotemporally concrete dynamics by which labor is made available and “consumed for the production of value.” I am particularly interested in two such dynamics:
permanent primitive accumulation and what Yann Moulier-Boutang (2006) has dubbed the “bridling of labor.”

Towards the end of Capital Volume 1, Marx (1992) points us towards a paradox in the argument presented so far: capital is made of surplus-value, but for there to be surplus-value, there must already be capital. “The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn around in a never-ending circle, which we can only get out of by assuming a primitive accumulation... which precedes capitalist accumulation; an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure.” (p. 873). From there on we are introduced to the “anything but idyllic” process of primitive accumulation in which “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part.” (p. 874). Further, Marx argues that “the capital relation presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour” (p. 874). Thus, that “so-called primitive accumulation, therefore is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (p. 874-75).

Rivers of ink have flowed over the issue of primitive accumulation, particularly as to whether it should be seen as a definite historical moment – that of the birth of capitalism –, or rather as an ongoing process that is repeated constantly. In The Invention of Capitalism, Michael Perelman (2000) provides probably one of the more comprehensive arguments for primitive accumulation as an ongoing process. According to him, Marx uses the concept and the discussion of “so called primitive accumulation” to show the bloody birth of capitalist relations, as a way of debunking the Robinsonades’ myths of the “naturality” of this type of relations of production. Quoting Marx in Volume 1 of Capital, Perelman presents us with the following idea:

...the pretensions of capital in its embryonic state, in its state of becoming, when it cannot yet use the sheer force of economic relations to secure its right to absorb a sufficient quantity of surplus labour, but must be aided by the power of the state. . . . Centuries are required before the “free” worker, owing to the greater development of the capitalist mode of production, makes a voluntary agreement, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life. (p. 31)
Here we can see primitive accumulation as including both the creation of identity formation – the “free” worker who willingly sells his labor power – and institutional arrangements – as the state comes constantly into play to secure capital’s need for absorbing sufficient quantities of surplus labor. This process has to be constantly restarted, not only because new spaces not under the iron law of capital are still to be found – à la Rosa Luxemburg (2003) –, but also because the limits between self-provisioning and monetization (wage labor) are constantly shifting as the struggle between living labor and capital is perpetually enacted: a company decides lay off workers during low season, whole families move away from the grasp of wage relations by going off to the mountains, or the state is forced to create a social security system, just to name three examples (see, De Angelis 2004; Sanyal 2013).

Thus, according to this particular reading, primitive accumulation is an ongoing process in which extra-economic practices are exercised to materially and symbolically place particular social groups – however conflictive this “placing” might be – in particular positions in regards to the market and the dynamics of capital accumulation. It is ongoing, because there is always an overarching tension between groups in flight, which try to remain beyond or outside the iron law of labor – however tenuous or fleeting this “beyond” and “outside” might be – and the different forms of labor capture.16

Nevertheless, capture and ongoing primitive accumulation are not synonymous. Capture is at the same time the placing of people in particular positions, as it is a process of creating

16 Massimo De Angelis (2004) makes the persuasive argument that the fundamental distinction between “primitive accumulation” and “expanded reproduction of capital” is one of form. Both of them are based on the constant separation between means of production and workers. The difference is that while in primitive accumulation the separation is very visible and violent, expanded reproduction rests on the idea that this is the way in which the world works. For this second element to operate correctly, it is necessary to create systems of meaning making that naturalize exploitation, restricting the space within which alternatives can even be thought of. In this case creating the idea that there is no “beyond” or “outside” the labor contract.
those positions; it appropriates, subdues and disciplines existing forms of being in the world, at
the same time as it produces and shapes new ones in accord with both the forms of domination
and capital accumulation. There are many forms of capture, of which primitive accumulation –
the constant process by which capital attempts to separate the control over the conditions of
labor and provisioning from the producers– is one. The other one that I explore here is the
“bridling of labor,” understood as the variable set of arrangements by which the worker’s body is
immobilized, or tied to the labor relation, in an attempt to prevent its flight, the breach of the
contract –be it *de jure* or *de facto*– and refusal to work (Moulier-Boutang 2006). This fixing
refers to those practices – that go beyond the wage labor relation and can be both formal and
informal– that obstruct the would-be workers’ (or workers’) mobility, whether geographical,
professional, social or political.

Ongoing primitive accumulation and labor bridling can and do tend to work together.
For example, through primitive accumulation, potential labor is freed from the means of labor,
and labor bridling makes sure it stays put and under the control of capital. In this sense, neither
mechanism is understood in a single and particular way. Rather, the idea with both concepts is
to try to apprehend the different ways in which living labor and communities are brought
together under the political economic logic of other classes and the law of capital, at the same
time as acknowledging that the whole process is fraught with frictions and moments in which,
however fleetingly, living labor is able to attain some level of autonomy or distance from the law
of capital (Henderson 1998).

At the same time, it is important to heed Silvia Federici’s (2004) warning that primitive
accumulation has been not only about the accumulation of wealth and “free” labor, but also of
fixing a set of hierarchies within the working class. Phrased in somewhat different words,
primitive accumulation – the violent introduction of people into capitalist relations – is
necessarily gendered. In this sense, the study of the processes of labor capture must also be the
study of the ways in which the penetration of capital has shifted the positions between men and
women, and between each and the overarching system. For example, according to Maureen Mackintosh (1989:35) “...not only do men’s and women’s experiences of class differ, but changes in the relations between men and women, including the sexual division of labour, is one of the ways in which new class structures become established.”

For Mackintosh, as well as for Crehan (1997), one of the threads along which we can approach these micro-processes of class formation and gender reorganization, is that of monetization as a signal of shifts in the relations with production and subsistence. Starting from a conceptual continuum of monetization of the reproduction of the household that moves from total self-provisioning to full wage labor; and, in parallel, we may use as our starting point a domestic regulatory form of labor control and division that runs along a continuum between kinship relations and market transactions. We are left with a model in which shifts in terms of the monetization of the subsistence of the household are also reflected in terms of the forms of domestic control and division of labor.

For example, in a household that is mostly self-provisioned, the division of labor is heavily gendered in terms of what is understood to be “women´s work” and “men´s work.” Women are subjugated, but this subjugation has to be understood in kinship terms and thus, the claims that each member of the household can make on the other members has to be understood in these terms. As the household´s subsistence is moved along the monetization thread by the process of labor capture, the forms of subjugation also begin to shift. Work that is monetized is separated from that which is not; and since the former becomes ever more important in procuring the household’s subsistence, it also becomes hierarchized and gendered. Production and reproduction (or the work of producing labor power) are thus separated and seen as discrete spheres of activity, with the market becoming the site of realization of the former and with men as its subject, and the household the site of the later, with women as its subject (Mies 1986).
This process should not be understood as complete, the actual historical situations tend to be located along the two continuums presented. Neither is it a peaceful or natural process; just as labor capture is constantly contested by subaltern subjects in general, so women’s “new” forms of subjugation are also renegotiated, reinterpreted and in need of constant mending. The question here is how the processes of labor capture and flight are gendered and disputed (or not) in particular settings. Where gender is understood as both “...a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and ...[as] a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1999:42).

**Postcolonial capital and passive revolution**

In 1821 the former provinces of Spain — Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala — began a long and conflict ridden process – from Spanish colonies to part of the Mexican Empire (between 1821 and 1823), to the Central American Federation (roughly between 1823 and 1838), – which eventually led them to become formally independent republics. After a bloodless independence, these societies or, in many cases, agglomerations of communities, began the process of trying to carve out a place in the world as both nations and states. In this sense, this process has to be understood within the larger overarching dynamics of the expansion of capital accumulation and the rise of the British and later U.S. empires. For the brand new Central American republics, this meant turning a set of not very efficient and limited colonial economies, organized around various bust and boom extractive cycles (for example, precious woods and cochineal) into some sort of viable capital accumulation. The fact that this could not be done from scratch, but was built upon what was there, meant that the postcolonial Central American economy was also going to center around extractive practices and that the possibilities of amassing profit would come from rent capture.

For the particular case of Italy during the *Risorgimento* Gramsci (1971) proposed the concept of “passive revolution” – or “revolution from above” or “revolution without a revolution” – to refer to the process by which the Italian bourgeoisie managed to rise to dominance without
being strong enough to become the moral and intellectual leader of the rest of the social classes. Rather, it had to enter into a set of concessions and pacts with the old dominant groups, to seal, however tenuously, its hegemonic position. In this way, the bourgeoisie managed to become dominant, but could not become a truly “progressive” force, in the sense of clearing the old regime up and creating the conditions for full-fledged capitalism.

In what Terence Byres (1994) has dubbed the neo-Gramscian approach, a body of literature has used this concept to approach and problematize the state-development connection in postcolonial India. Kalyan Sanyal (2013:31) in his synthesis of this approach describes the process of passive revolution in these terms:

...when the bourgeoisie is relatively weak in civil society, it resorts to a passive revolution in which it allies with the old dominant classes to get into macro power on the level of the state, and then engages in molecular transformation of civil society. The bourgeoisie, in this case, has to seek legitimation on the basis of a mixed agenda consisting of, along with its own goals, goals of other groups as well. In other words, the thesis (capital), for its own development, incorporates a part of the antithesis (pre-capital), producing a surrogate synthesis that blocks the true synthesis, (full-fledged capitalism).

According also to Sanyal (p. 35), the neo-Gramscian approach is built upon four larger claims: 1. the post-colonial bourgeoisie has to form alliances with dominant pre-capitalist groups to attain state power; 2. it must legitimize capital accumulation as a national-popular goal; 3. this need for legitimation, rules out a full-fledged process of primitive accumulation in a time in which liberal principles of development and human rights are themselves gaining legitimacy, and; 4. the state therefore has to preserve and protect pre-capitalist modes of production. In this sense, the development question – understood as the superseding of the pre-capitalist or traditional, by the capitalist or modern – is a false one. The traditional sector must be conserved as part of the unstable equilibrium of political forces needed to maintain hegemony under the framework of passive revolution. As Partha Chatterjee (quoted by Sanyal 2013:33) argues, the bourgeoisie instead of destroying the pre-capitalist elites, seeks “to limit
their former power, neutralize them where necessary, attack them only selectively, and in
general bring them round to a position of subsidiary allies within a reformed state structure.”

Sanyal himself proposes the necessity of moving beyond this approach. For him, the
whole neo-Gramscian approach, all Marxism really, sees the traditional sector as external to
capital, and thus as something that could eventually be superseded. Rather, from his
perspective, “…pre-capital constitutes and internal ‘other’…” (p. 39). Thus, he proposes that we
replace pre- by non-capitalist. Further, for him it is crucial to recuperate the idea that primitive
accumulation is not only present in the postcolonial Indian context, but it is a constituent
element of capital accumulation. In his approach, primitive accumulation is a constant process
by which significant amounts of labor are “freed” without all of it being absorbed by the
economy; this labor surplus becomes the non-capitalist sector. In this model then, legitimation
is achieved not by avoiding primitive accumulation, but by rehabilitating the non-capitalist
sector through the discourse and practices of development, which he calls “reverse-primitive
accumulation.”

I would argue that this way of approaching the postcolonial rise to power of the
bourgeoisie is also useful for understanding Central American reality, but with a few critical
caveats. First, India’s independence arrived more than 100 years after Central America’s and
thus, the level of development of global capitalism and of bourgeois sentiments and groups was
different. Second, unlike England, Spain was hardly a booming economic empire and the
articulation of the Latin American colonies was first and foremost as producers of raw materials
and little to no technology transfer took place. Third, as Sanyal also points out, the legitimation
and accumulation scale of the neo-Gramscian approach is fundamentally national. For the
Central American case it is impossible to understand the region’s historical trajectory without
taking into account the U.S. role. Finally, I agree with Sanyal in regards to the necessity of seeing
the traditional sector as internal to the dynamics of capitalism and also regarding the centrality
that primitive accumulation has for postcolonial capital. However, his argument regarding
reverse primitive accumulation has to be limited to the post-World War II period when
development – as a particular set of discourses and practices – really took flight. Rather, I
would argue that the tension between primitive accumulation and legitimation has to be
understood within the hegemonic tension between consent and coercion. In other words, those
periods in which primitive accumulation is exercised freely and extensively tend to be followed
by periods in which concessions are given to subaltern groups in an attempt to maintain some
equilibrium in the relations of force.

Taking these elements into account, I “...begin by recognizing that it is economic
heterogeneity that constitutes capitalism within which capital, as a specific relation of
production, exists, and then ask whether that heterogeneity itself can be seen as an expression of
capital’s hegemony” (Sanyal 2013:7).

**Rent capture as state formation**

Using the analytical scheme just presented, I would argue that the early – mainly 19th-century –
Central American postcolonial political economy must be understood as a hegemonic scramble.
In this scramble different social groups that came out of the postcolonial period struggled to
gain control over the points of rent capture that would give them economic dominance and,
through this process, to create a political framework that would allow them to enter and retain
political power over society. This was not a simple task. First of all, as we can imagine, the lack
of complexity of the Central American economies translated into a limited level of social
differentiation between groups, particularly between dominant or elite ones. Thus, what
eventually became the Liberal and Conservative parties found their differences in the grounds of
affinity to either the pro-independence movement or the Spanish crown more than in some sort
of class cleavage (Pérez-Brignoli 1989). Further, the fact that there had been no war of

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17 However, it is important to remember Marc Edelman and Angelique Haugerud’s (2005:6) argument
that “[b]oth the terms ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’ were invented well before World War II
(though their visibility waxed and waned and their precise meanings changed).”
independence meant that there would not be any liberators – in the mold of Bolívar or San Martín in South America – that could carry enough legitimation into the postcolonial period.

This was also a period of flux in which new concepts were being adapted in practice. As the early nineteenth-century Honduran statesman José Cecilio del Valle described the period after independence in 1821:

We were subjects of the Spanish government, in one of the less advanced provinces of America; and all of a sudden, without any previous learning, we ascended to the throne as legislators to organize Republics, form states and dictate fundamental laws (quoted by Barahona 2002:231)

It should then come as no surprise that the initial governmental steps were taken within the framework of the colonial period. A clear example of this was the struggle around the Central American Union that lasted from 1824 to 1838. The Union, was an attempt by a loose alliance of “Liberal” individuals and groups in the various countries, that promoted the idea that it was better to remain as a single Central American republic, than to become five small countries, which was in general terms the position defended by the “Conservatives.” Hindsight is, as they say, always 20/20, and it would seem that the unionist proposal would have worked better for everyone involved. However at the moment, there were simply more elements keeping apart the different countries, than the forces bringing them together – basically protecting themselves from foreign intervention, as Thomas Karnes (1976) persuasively shows. Further, it is important to add the direct involvement of the U.S. in discouraging the consolidation of the Union. Moreover, in the case of Honduras, it is worth mentioning the conflictive relationship with England over the territories of British Honduras –today independent Belize – which helped to create an embryonic and antagonistic national identity in opposition to the European power and the other former colonies (Barahona 2002).

Taking these two elements together, what we find is a situation in which various social groups were trying to come to grips with a new set of political tasks and notions, at the same time as they tried to negotiate how they would enter and be articulated with the global capitalist
market. Here again the colonial legacy weighed heavily, as this articulation was necessarily thought through finding rent capture opportunities in the form of export-oriented cash crops or extractive activities, such as mining and precious woods. We have to speak almost of a three-pronged process in which the groups scrambling for dominance were embarking on becoming a capitalist class, a nation – in the sense of creating a sense of national belonging among a group of isolated communities – and a state – in terms of creating the institutions and understandings that would mediate these political practices and bargain for their position at the global scale. 18 The relations between these dynamics are more than evident. Rent capturing was necessary for there to be some sort of institutional centralization and expansion and penetration of political power to create something that would look like a modern state in the European mirror (Quijano 2000) in which the Central American elites saw themselves. At the same time, some sort of centralized political power was needed to procure the conditions of production behind the rent capturing (infrastructure, labor laws, etc.); and a sense of national belonging was crucial to hide the class tracks of the whole process and present a much more unified image. 19

Following this line, I would argue that for the postcolonial Central American case, the process of state, nation and class formation came together and combined in particular forms, depending on the specific country, its resources and historical trajectory (Mahoney 2001). It is useful to think about this from the perspective of how labor, capital and land were (or were expected to be) articulated to promote the accumulation of capital. For the particular case of Honduras, at least until the early 1900s, this hegemonic scramble appeared mainly as a politico-military conflict. According to Rachel Sieder (1995:103), in this period “...Republican politics

18 Kligman and Verdery (2011:3) make a somewhat similar argument for Communist Romania: “Contrary to popular belief, collectivization in Romania did not involve a powerful Communist Party imposing its will on the countryside, for Party rule itself was in a process of being created. To see the Party-state as a fully formed social actor at the time of collectivizing... would be an error.”

19 For a different, albeit complementary study, see David Nugent´s (1997) study on Peru.
was distinguished by intense regionalism, lack of national integration and almost constant foreign intervention. Lack of domestic capital and recurring military conflict proved persistent obstacles to sustained economic development throughout the nineteenth century.”

This conflict took the form of constant armed rebellions and internal fighting between different factions that would take on the label of either Liberal or Conservatives. What seems to be at stake was exactly the shape that political power would take. While there was an agreement – built upon the colonial legacy – that land equaled power, how exactly this relation would work was the center of the conflict. For the Conservative sectors, the idea was to maintain basically the colonial hegemonic equilibrium organized around a geographically fragmented system of cattle ranching – with the hacienda system as the nucleus of political power –, a boom and bust agro-export sector and a significant peasant sector, dedicated mainly to a self-provisioning economy that operated to a significant degree on community lands.

For the Liberals, the task was rather to radically transform the economic structure to create the basic conditions to expand capital accumulation and thus, modernize the country. For this, the grabbing of government was crucial, as it was seen “…as the vehicle par excellence to overcome the initial constraints” (Del Cid 1988:32).

Neither group was able to fully defeat the other and in the end the process took a form close to the one described by Gramsci (1971:219) as “Caesarism”: “[w]hen the progressive force A struggles with the reactionary force B, not only may A defeat B or B defeat A, but it may ...

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20 For a more elaborated version of this argument, see Sergio Tischler’s (2001) book on what he calls the “large farmer Guatemalan state form” [La forma finquera del Estado]. According to Tischler, the postcolonial Guatemalan state was organized along the same lines of social control present in the country’s large haciendas.

21 For example, in reference to del Valle’s economic thought, Barahona (2002:353–53) mentions that: “...the economic project of del Valle for the construction of an independent and sovereign Central American nation, contemplated the creation the optimum conditions for the development of a capitalist agriculture that was mainly oriented towards the foreign market, as a way of acquiring social wealth.”
happen that neither A nor B defeats the other... and then a third force C intervenes from outside, subjugating what is left of both A and B.”

Towards the end of the 19th century, Liberal governments came to power in all of Central America and began promoting laws intended to stimulate commercial agriculture. However, according to Sieder (1995:103–04), “While communal landholdings were under attack elsewhere in the region, the Honduran Ley de Fomento de la Agricultura, passed in 1887, had the effect of strengthening traditional agriculture, extending and protecting the ejidos ...”

For example,

between the Liberal ‘revolution’ of 1871 and 1883, close to 400,000 hectares of public lands in Guatemala were sold and another 74,250 hectares entered the market with the abolition of the censo enfitéutico, a type of ninety-nine year lease that granted access to ejido lands in return for an annual rent of 2 or 3 per cent of their value. This is a lot of land (4,742.5 km²), and it clearly ended up in the hands of a small number of owners. But the main importance of Liberal land privatization may, as some recent analyses argue, lie less in its territorial extent than in the social relations that it destroyed and created and in the multiple ways it exposed subaltern groups to the discipline of the state, elites and the market. Concretely, Liberal ‘reform’ in Guatemala and El Salvador (and to a lesser extent elsewhere) dispossessed indigenous populations, created a huge pool of landless ‘free’ workers, and solidified central states that deployed formidable apparatuses of labour control and repression. (Edelman and León 2013:1702–03)

In contrast, the Honduran “liberal” land law did not directly attack the communal and municipal rights to control, hold and distribute land. On the contrary, it encouraged them to maintain the same tenure relationships as before. According to Robert Williams (1994), when we combine this situation with the lack of roads, we begin to understand the difficulties that the coffee industry taking hold in the country.22 I will return to this in a moment.

22 According to Williams, “[b]ecause of poor transportation networks, it was difficult for the Liberals who occupied high government offices to transform agriculture in the manner they may have wished. Decisions regarding land and who had access to it were left to the local municipalities, which tended to preserve traditional rights” (Williams 1994:94).
This situation speaks loudly of the type of relations that existed between the contending political groups, as the Liberals were unable to fully advance their agenda, and were forced to make concessions to remain in government to the former dominant groups, who relied on certain limited access to land by peasants as a form of political control. Further, it also speaks of the importance of keeping the peasantry somewhat happy, as levying forces for the armed conflicts clashed constantly with the tension between capture and flight that I mentioned before.

This situation meant that in the Honduran case, rent capture, and thus, the processes of state and class formation could not take the same trajectory as in the rest of the region. Much has been written on the relation between the development of coffee and state formation in Central America during the Liberal period (see for example Williams 1994; Paige 1998); and the supposed lack of its development in Honduras until the 1940s is one of the arguments used to explain for the weaker state in Honduras (for example, Torres-Rivas 1981; Mahoney 2001).

Without entering into much detail, the general argument is that coffee, due to its development by British and German capital, which controlled its commercialization, and local elites involved mainly in production, a situation arose in which governments were able to profit fiscally from the crop. Thus, a coffee oligarchy emerged in the same process in which growing income from exports allowed the government to strengthen, centralize and expand its grip over the national territory, particularly through the professionalization of the army. This was not the case of Honduras, where the process of primitive accumulation was not as extensive and where the development of the crop foundered in the face of limits imposed by territorial fragmentation and lack of the infrastructure.

If we were to return to the schema of looking at how labor, capital and land were combined in this period, we could present this situation in this way. On the one hand, in the rest of Central America, particularly El Salvador and Guatemala, there was a labor surplus that had resulted from the process of labor capture and land grabbing. Then, these two resources could be combined with British and German merchant capital, organized around the production of
coffee, to create a set of financial surpluses that allowed for the creation of both a relatively strong army, a set of centralized public institutions and a dominant coffee oligarchy.

On the other hand, in Honduras, since the Liberals had been unable to gain supremacy over the rest of the political forces in the country, the process of labor capture was much more limited, which had been anyway one of the largest problems in the province since the colonial period, and thus did not have either the land concentration or the labor surpluses to articulate with foreign merchant capital around coffee. I already showed how the problem of lack of labor was both absolute and relative, as it had to do as much with low population densities, as well as with the (supposedly) low levels of its quality. In the case of land, the situation was different. It was not so much that Honduran territory was limited, but rather that vast amounts of land were simply outside of the control of the elites and were thus understood as empty. Because of this situation, the task of the Liberals during the governments of Marco Aurelio Soto (1876-83) and Luis Bográn (1883-91) centered mainly on trying to connect and thus control the rest of the country, populate it with “better” human quality (Europeans and North Americans) and attract foreign capital.23

The fact that agriculture had proven to be a sort of dead end made Soto turn his eyes towards the promotion of foreign capital investment in mining, which proved to be quite a lucrative venture for both the investors and a very limited sector of the domestic elite (Molina, Reina, and Palma 1983). However, mining had a limited effect in the strengthening of the government, as little to no fiscal revenues were collected by the Honduran state.

23 In Marvin Barahona’s (2002:250) words: “Most of the times they were [economic projects] singular ideas that were presented as the ‘great solution’ for the economic problems faced by the nation. In this way, that the dream to see the country populated by European and North American immigrants, of uniting the national territory from coast to coast with an interoceanic railroad, or resuscitating the mining industry, were in their time, projects in which the hopes of the nation were deposited.”
The other activity eyed by the Liberals was the construction of a trans-oceanic railroad, which would connect the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. This idea was connected with the U.S. expansionism towards Mexico and the discovery of gold deposits in California, which triggered a massive gold rush. In this context, the creation of the railroad would significantly shorten the distance between both U.S. coasts and benefit the country in the form of massive rents (Barahona 2002), much as occurred in Nicaragua, where thousands of miners traversed the isthmus via the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua. However, in the end this Honduran railroad project was a failure. The Honduran government incurred in a massive debt with British banks to finance the construction and much of the funds were lost along the way through different forms of embezzlement. It took the Honduran people a long time to finally pay off this debt.

**Creating a banana republic**

The tally of these two economic activities was not very flattering in terms of the grand attempts at nation-state (and class) formation by the Liberals. On the one hand, mining had proven effective in creating a certain amount of profits, but these had remained within a limited clique and had had little to no effect in increasing the government’s revenues or helping extend its influence over the territory. Further, the riches found in the Honduran mines had a short life and soon were exhausted. On the other hand, the rent capturing dreams of the trans-oceanic railroad had only translated into frustration and making of Honduras a state basically born in debt.

In the early twentieth century, the promotion of immigration became even more central to the Liberals’ attempts to modernize the country. For example, in 1906, new legislation was approved that created an Immigration and Agriculture Council to propose and carry out immigration and colonization projects. However, the European and U.S. nationals that actually arrived in the country cared little about the government’s expectations (colonization and agricultural ventures) and instead settled in ports and worked in the commercial sector.
same time, the arrival of other immigrants – Arabs, Chinese, black West Indians – provoked xenophobic reactions, making clear that the Liberals' view of the modernization was process was selective and racialized.²⁴

This embryonic form of nationalism, which tended to be fueled by the frequent interventions of the U.S. in Central America, constantly came into tension with the diagnosis and cure proposed for the national economy. Thus, at the same time as restrictions were placed on certain nationalities, an open door policy for foreign capital was being inaugurated. In an attempt to attract foreign investment, the Honduran government began to offer generous concessions of land, tax exemptions and almost free exploitation rights over land and natural resources (Williams 1994; Soluri 2009; Barahona 2005). In a short time, this policy brought most of the (limited) economic activities in the country under the control of foreign concessionaires.

It is in this context that the entry and consolidation of the banana companies in the Honduran north coast must be understood. Banana production for export in Central America began as early as the 1870s (Posas 1993). Initially, these exports were carried out in a manner not that different from that of coffee. The local producers, most of them medium sized, would carry their production to the ports, where steamships would receive and buy the fruit, and later carry it to the United States. While most banana production was in Honduran hands at this time, some significant competition existed between shippers.

Just as this commerce was intensifying, the government, under Liberal control with Soto, was embracing an export-oriented policy, which helped to consolidate the banana industry. However, it is worth mentioning that in the Ley de Fomento de la Agricultura, already

²⁴ This was not of course something exclusive to Honduras, but rather a general trend present in most of the Caribbean Basin (see, for example, Putnam 2002; Gudmundson et al. 2010).
mentioned above, which gave tax and financial incentives for export-oriented farmers, bananas were not included (Soluri 2009).

This was not the only element acting against the consolidation of the industry in the early period. Just as I have already mentioned, willing labor was hard to come by. For example, during the 1880s “...frequent armed conflicts disrupted labor supplies by causing men to flee towns and farms in order to avoid impressment.” This situation would carry on into the 20th century, as

For example, in 1902 a U.S. citizen named Howard Reed complained about labor shortages due to the unwillingness of Hondurans living in the highlands to work on the coast. The Honduran government approved his request to introduce up to one thousand workers ‘suitable for agricultural work in the tropics excluding Chinese, Blacks and Coolies.’ (Soluri 2009:24 and 25)

These two quotations are illustrative of some of the topics that I have been touching upon, particularly the difficulties of labor capture at that time. This idea of men fleeing towns and farms to avoid being drafted points to the tensions between capture and flight in a lively way. Further, Reed’s complaints not only present this situation again, but add the idea of the low quality of the labor that could be found in the country. In both cases – the capture-flight tension and the effective lack of labor – the state question was placed squarely in the middle. In terms of the lack of labor, the necessity of regulating the type of migrant workers that would enter the country was crucial, as well as expanding control over territory and thus limiting the space for labor flight. In terms of hegemony, some sort of socio-political stability was needed for these forms of labor capture to operate, and for this a group needed to somehow rise above the rest. I will return to this shortly.

In terms of production, these barriers did not deter either national or foreign investors from expanding the crop along the Honduran north coast at the turn of the new century. For example, in 1905 Honduran banana exports totaled 4.4 million bunches and represented a significant amount of the wealth produced in the region. However, transportation continued to
be one of the main obstacles for the full development of the industry. According to Soluri (2009:26–27):

The National Railroad [the limited section built with the funds for the Trans-Oceanic Railroad], which ran some sixty miles inland from Puerto Cortés to the town of Potrerillos (south of San Pedro Sula), was the only significant railway in the region. Banana growers relied primarily upon fluvial transportation networks to carry their fruit to points of embarkation along the coast. Roads were poorly maintained and often impassable during the rainy season. Consequently, production zones were concentrated near ports, navigable inland waterways, and the National Railroad. These early banana zones emerged primarily on account of the efforts of small- and medium-scale growers with limited capital resources.

The combination between bananas becoming a profitable venture, the lack of infrastructure, the policies for attracting foreign investment and the particular hegemonic needs of the local elites would create the conditions for the industry to become vertically integrated and under the control of U.S. capital. This was the birth of a quintessential banana republic.

**Banana politics and hegemony**

Following my discussion so far, it should come as no wonder that some of the first and most important concessions given to the would-be banana companies came by the way of railroad investments. Although the Inter-Oceanic Railroad venture had been a failure, railroads in general continued to fuel the Honduran elites’ dreams of an interconnected country in which – if the right type of labor were imported – great riches would be amassed and the country modernized. In 1902 the U.S. citizen William Streich received a concession to build and operate a railroad in the municipality of Omoa, department of Cortés, which also included the rights to lease property alongside the tracks to establish banana farms. Three years later the concession was passed to Samuel Zemurray, who with financial backing from the United Fruit Company (UFCO) bought Streich’s Cuyamel Company. In 1904, one year prior to Zemurray’s

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25 For example, Soluri (2009:43) mentions that “[f]or many Honduran elites, railroads were the ties that would bind the nation-state both by linking the North Coast to the highlands and by generating revenue for other state-building projects.”
arrival, the New Orleans based Vaccaro Brothers and Company also received a concession to build a railroad in the brand new province of Atlántida (Posas 1993). In both cases, the U.S. investors built their lines with the sole purpose of hauling bananas, disregarding the commitments made in the concession agreements to helping the interconnection of the country. In this way, “[t]hese railroad projects initiated a trend that would eventually leave just two companies in control of the production, transportation, and distribution of export bananas” (Soluri 2009:33).

According to Soluri, this move towards vertical integration was not only oriented by transport difficulties in the production sites, but also by the need for better control over both quantity and quality of the fruit reaching the U.S. and for lowering the financial risks of trading in highly perishable agricultural commodities. In any case, the rhythms of the now global banana industry became intertwined with the hegemonic scramble in Honduras. In December, 1910, Manuel Bonilla launched an attack on Trujillo, with a small armed force of U.S. mercenaries financed by Zemurray. Just three years before, Nicaraguan forces had invaded Tegucigalpa, ousted Bonilla and put the Liberal Miguel Dávila in his place. Shortly after assuming the presidency, Dávila signed a treaty with the U.S. which granted the latter rights to oversee the country’s customs receipts. This was seen as a threat to the banana man, who feared that this might bring an end to the juicy duty exemptions held by the company. Further, unlike the period under Bonilla, Dávila granted important concessions – including the leasing of the National Railroad – to rival U.S. investors.

Dávila asked the U.S. government to intervene in the armed conflict with Bonilla, which led to a mediated settlement – upon the U.S.S.Tacoma – which culminated with the naming of Francisco Bertrand as interim president. This meant defeat for Dávila and the Liberal party, as it opened up the door for Bonilla to be elected in the November 1911 elections. Gramsci’s definition of Caesarism, which I noted above, presents a situation in which forces A and B struggle against each other, with neither of them being able to of overcome their opponent “...
and then a third force C intervenes from outside, subjugating what is left of both A and B” (Gramsci 1971:219). If we understand this subjugating not as formal and total control, but as meddling and influencing to make sure that one of the forces is able to come into power and legislate in favor of C’s interests, then we can use this model of Caesarism to understand the rise in influence that Zemurray and UFCO eventually came to have over the country.

With Bonilla as president, Zemurray and UFCO managed to secure various railroad and land concessions. This meant that for the first time in over ten years, banana companies managed to establish a secure foothold in the country. The railroad concessions were particularly important in this direction. According to Soluri (2009:43)

The railroad concessions provided the legal means by which the U.S. fruit companies established control over vast quantities of resources. Although not identical, most of the concessions granted by early-twentieth century Honduran governments followed a similar formula: in return for constructing and operating piers, railroads, and telegraph lines, the concessionaires received rights to soil, timber, water, and mineral resources in addition to tax and duty exemptions.

It was through this mechanism that the different banana companies – particularly UFCO, Zemurray’s Cuyamel and Vaccaro Brothers – came to control a massive amount of resources in Honduras. By 1929, around 29 million banana bunches were being exported from Honduras, more than Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala and Colombia put together. Also, more than 15 hundred kilometers of railroad linked banana farms stretching along the north coast. In terms of land, UFCO and its subsidiaries possessed over 160,000 hectares of land, including 30,000 covered by bananas and another 6,000 by pastures. The Cuyamel Fruit Co. held 55,000 hectares and Standard Fruit Company’s Honduran subsidiaries came to control over 23,000 hectares (Soluri 2009:53).

The banana companies’ production process had a very particular spatial dynamic. Due to diminishing soil fertility and the advent of the Panama disease in the 1920s, the profitability of the enterprise was predicated upon a kind of shifting agriculture. In this form of production, large extensions of land would be used to plant bananas and then later abandoned, with the
process starting anew in another place free of the disease. This meant two things at least. First, that the banana companies needed to keep large amounts of idle land in reserve for later use; as we will see, this would eventually become a conflictive situation. Second, the whole system depended on constantly securing land concessions from the government. Thus, the various banana companies were competing among themselves to control or win the favors of government officials. In this, no one was more aggressive than Zemurray, who in 1928 came to be in the middle of another political scandal.

In May of that year, U.S. port officials in New Orleans intercepted $50,000 worth of arms being loaded aboard a Cuyamel Company steamboat bound for Honduras. Nineteen twenty-eight was an election year in Honduras and although it was never proven, U.S. government officials suspected that Zemurray was funneling arms and resources to Liberal party supporters in anticipation of a post-election rebellion. Party colors were of little importance to the banana man, who would as easily bet on a National party politician such as Bonilla, than support a Liberal uprising. In this case, the target of his animosity was the UFCO-backed National Party candidate Tiburcio Carías Andino. He was particularly concerned about his access to the production zone along the shared and disputed border between Guatemala and Honduras.  

Since 1915 both Cuyamel and UFCO had been in an open struggle to gain control over these lands, trying to manipulate and influence both governments in their favor. By the late 1920s the conflict between both countries continued to escalate and with troops assembling on the contested border, the U.S. government decided to intervene. At the same time, the Department of State pressured Zemurray to strike a truce with his company’s opponents and thus make the border dispute more manageable. In 1929,

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26 For a detailed account of this border conflict and the role of the banana company, see Paul Dosal’s (1993 particularly chapters 5 and 8) political history of the United Fruit Company in Guatemala.
United Fruit eventually agreed to purchase the assets of the Cuyamel Fruit Company from Zemurray for 300,000 shares of United Fruit stock. United Fruit acquired nearly 22,000 hectares of land planted in bananas, sugar cane, and coconuts; 23,000 hectares of forest and wetlands; steamships; and control over an additional 13 percent of the U.S. market. Zemurray, now holding United Fruit stock worth $32 million, retired to his family estate near New Orleans. (Soluri 2009:74)

With this move, one of the most important pieces in the Honduran hegemonic jigsaw puzzle came into place. The merger between Cuyamel and UFCO meant that their struggles over political power would no longer be reflected into the electoral arena and that with the rise of a single banana company, a single political faction would rise to power. However, it is important to remember that power is always exercised against resistance and that structural changes must always come with the creation of new social groups; we turn to this in the next section.

**Camperos vs. El Pulpo: the rise of organized labor**

By the 1930s, the forces unleashed by the development and transformation of the banana industry had had a deep impact in the social and political fabric of the country. The plantations and cities that grew up around the industry became socially and economically dynamic places, attracting incoming flows of labor – both foreign (West Indian and Salvadoran) and Honduran from the country’s west, center and south – and the creation of new social groups (Molina, Reina, and Palma 1983; Del Cid 1988). However, parallel to this dynamism the levels of social discontent against the foreign banana companies continued to increase. This discontent, which took the form of a nationalistic discourse, was aimed at what was seen as a sell-out government that did everything and anything that the companies and particularly *el pulpo* – the octopus, as the UFCO was popularly known – asked. Besides this nationalist posture, or rather within and through it, came also very concrete grievances presented by the nascent organized labor movement. The emerging unions, created in the framework of the banana plantations, was increasingly fighting to improve workers’ living and working conditions, although mainly by following a corporatist agenda.
As Barahona (2005:87) points out, “The rise in labor organization, since 1929, coincided with the beginning of the world economic crisis and its consequences soon after.” Since at the time the north coast was the only region closely linked to the U.S. market, “the crisis took the form of the closing down of plantations, mass layoffs, reductions in salaries and the accentuation of xenophobia among the national workers.”

The mass layoffs in particular, which were a combination of the effects of the contracting U.S. market as well as of the spread of Panama disease (Soluri 2009), began to create a critical situation, in which the levels of violence increased as labor organizations became stronger. The creation of the Honduran Union Federation (FSH) in 1929, in particular, spurred campaigns for better wages and an eight-hour working day. The banana companies were quick to react and pressured the government to repress the labor movement. The government obliged and proclaimed martial law in the departments of Atlántida, Cortés, Colón and Yoro, where the plantations were located. Further, various paramilitary organizations – including a local branch of the Ku Klux Klan – were created to repress the new labor organizations. By 1932 the conflict between labor and capital – with the intervention of the state tilted in favor of the latter – had intensified, with a strike against a 15 percent decrease in wages implemented all the banana plantations on the north coast. The UFCO requested military intervention and the strike was drowned in blood.

Nonetheless, the labor movement continued to grow, as became evident in the run-up to the 1932 national elections. The Communist Party, as well as other labor organizations, had done a good job of organizing the railroad workers and the camperos – as the banana plantation workers were colloquially known – and were presenting the Party’s general secretary, Manuel Calix Herrera, as a presidential candidate for the Worker-Peasant Bloc. As Marvin Barahona (2005) points out, this would have been the first presidential candidate born outside of the traditional elites. In the end, however, the state could not allow for such accommodation and the labor movement was brutally repressed, its leaders either killed or exiled. A set of progressive
labor policies presented by the Liberal government of Colindres were voted down by the National Party and the Bloc was unable to present candidates in the election.

It is worth stopping for a second, and looking at this situation from the standpoint of hegemony and how the state-class link was operating. As we have seen, “[f]oreign investors cemented links with the local ruling class through a mixture of patronage networks and coercion, employing both methods in order to secure favourable concessions” (Sieder 1995:104).

According to this same author,

> Under the influence of foreign capital, the politics of favours became a defining feature of the political system, aided and abetted by the weakness of central authority, deep-rooted traditions of caudillismo, and the chronic instability which plagued the country for the better part of the century following independence.

> In this context then, “[d]omestic political elites came to function as intermediaries for foreign concerns, rarely acting with any sense of unity or national interest” (p. 104). In terms of class formation, this observation is important. The material reproduction of the local elites rested upon rent capture, so there were no real incentives for the creation of a strong and dynamic national bourgeoisie. Further, since the main form of rent capture came from a single activity – bananas – under the control of a limited number of companies, this meant that to a significant extent their reproduction rested upon their links with these companies. Thus, the labor movement was as much a threat for them as it was for the banana companies.

> The increasing levels of organization and the fighting spirit of labor nonetheless had to be taken seriously. For this to happen, it was necessary to make changes in the political system to open some space for new social groups, while maintaining the same composition of the bloc in power. Political domination – Gramsci reminds us – is a complex set of relations between consent and coercion, between hegemony and dictatorship. The problematic of hegemony was shaped by the political practice between governing elites, incipient new social groups and the overwhelming weight of the banana companies. At the turn of the 1930s, the solution to the
problem posed by the labor movement would be dictatorship, and its most public face would be Tiburcio Carías Andino.

Order and peace: The Carías dictatorship and the stabilization of domination

The elections set for the end of 1932 pitted Tiburcio Carías Andino of the National Party against José Angel Zúñiga Huete of the Liberal Party. Both manifested similar characteristics and each had a perfect traditional caudillo résumé: lawyers, of liberal extraction, undisputed leaders of their respective parties and former government. As the elections neared, both candidates were sure of victory, which was usually a sign that the campaign would end in dissension by the losing party and some sort of armed revolt. However, at the same time, the economic crisis and the rising challenge of the labor movement meant that these elections were crucial for the survival of the two-party system and politics as usual (Barahona 2005)

In the end, the results gave Carías a landslide victory over Zúñiga. As everyone expected, the Liberal Party and its followers, including many of the military commanders rebelled in an attempt to stop the elected president from taking office. However, the rebellion was quickly suppressed by the collective military action of the adherents of the two party system, which included members of the outgoing government (with a Liberal president), the National Party and national air forces (Argueta 2008), as well as the U.S. government and the banana companies, in their effort to transfer the costs of the crisis to the working classes (Bulmer-Thomas 1993). Thus, Carías was able to assume the presidency in February 1933, which would eventually extend into a 16-year-long dictatorship, “legalized” through two constitutional reforms passed in 1936 and 1939.27

27 Each one of these reforms tended to concentrate more power around the figure of the president. For example, in the Constitution of 1936, the president was designated as Policía Mayor [literally, supreme policeman], which meant that he could take control over the national police. It also allowed the executive to expel people from the country and eliminated the age limit of 65 year of age to be president (Carías was to turn 60 that same year) (Argueta 2008). In 1939 a series of other constitutional reforms were passed, including the designation of the municipal authorities directly by the president and not by popular
The Carías dictatorship is important and constitutes a watershed in Honduran history on various levels. Regionally, it was part of a pattern that saw the ascent of conservative and highly repressive authoritarian regimes in the five Central American republics. In general terms, these regimes were the reaction to the emergence of new social groups in the region – mainly organized labor, peasant movements and the commercial petite bourgeoisie – that came to challenge the traditional dominant blocs, as well as the severe post-1929 economic and fiscal crisis in all the countries and the collapse of both coffee and banana prices. Victor Bulmer-Thomas (1993:348) notes that,

[in exchange for the preservation of their class interests, the elite in the four republics of the north [Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua], were prepared to renounce all of their accustomed privileges and benefits, which at least, since the 1920s, had given the superficially democratic appearance to the political process.

Phrased differently, the elites gave up control over the governmental structures in exchange for remaining as the dominant classes. At the same time, the arrival of Carías allowed or signaled the supposed separation of politics from economics, with the latter hidden behind the mask of the former in the appearance of an independent government (Abrams’ [1988] famous “mask of the state”). Also, the Carías regime to a certain extent delinked the dynamics of rent capture from class formation, and thus created the necessity of some sort of productive diversification by even the more conservative elites.

This move towards autocratic regimes could never have happened had the position of the U.S. in relation to the region not changed. In 1923, the U.S. had forced all the Central American states to sign what came to be known as the General Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which stated the conditions under which a government would receive international recognition. The election. According to Mario Argueta (2008:103), this reform “…only came to increase the concentration of power in the Executive. In this way, the last traces of popular expression by electoral means disappeared.”
objective was to control and contain the influence that other powers could have in the region. However, by the 1930s this fear had significantly diminished and the U.S. focus shifted away from the region to more important issues (Bulmer-Thomas 1993). In any case, since Carías’s election was seen as constitutionally sound, it was non-issue, at least before the modifications of the constitution.

In domestic political terms, the dictatorship also had a significant effect. Carías moved quickly to purge his own National Party from the elements that were against his continuation in power. This meant that slowly but surely, the different elements of opposition in the country began to gravitate towards the Liberal Party. Thus, if initially the difference between both groups was very limited, with the dictatorship the gap began to widen. This would be particularly the case for those sectors of the incipient commercial and industrial bourgeoisie who were born around the cities of the north coast and who had roots in the Middle East (Euraque 1996). The idea of opposition has to be tempered, however. As a prominent National Party exile wrote to U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “[t]he Honduran who did not agree with the dictatorship could choose between jail, exile and burial [el encierro, el destierro, o el entierro]” (Venancio Callejas quoted by Barahona 2005:101).

The Carías regime’s social base consisted of the large landowners and local elites whose wealth was based on the possession of land, as well as the the UFCO and the U.S. government (Argueta 2008). The army had a clear role in the process too. Knowing how easily military leaders could turn into political contenders, Carías kept the officer corps on a short leash and eventually – from 1946 onwards – began a process of professionalization that saw many go abroad to study. More than the Army, Carías began to rely heavily on the Air Force, which he called the “support of the national peace” and which was much more securely under his grasp (Barahona 2005; Bulmer-Thomas 1993).

His alliance with the banana companies has been the target of much criticism and is here that the idea of the “banana republic” really took off. Carías and UFCO were two sides of the
same coin and their fates were tightly knit into the Honduran political fabric. Although these companies did not leave much in terms of taxes, their weight within the local economy was so massive that it had to be taken into account. For example, in 1929, bananas accounted for 85 percent of all Honduran exports, a figure that decreased somewhat over time, but in 1950 still accounted for 70 percent of total exports and 45 percent by 1960 (Del Cid 1988:139).

It would be a mistake, however, to think that under Carías the only thing that flourished was the banana industry, or that his policies only focused on the north coast. Rather, it is during this period that the strategy of passive revolution is consolidated as capital accumulation by the banana plantations and political support by the conservative elites were meshed together into a state project. This separation between economics and politics had a very clear and distinct geographical pattern. While the north coast and its banana plantations became the nucleus of capital accumulation with San Pedro Sula as its capital (the “industrial capital of Honduras,” as it is commonly known), Tegucigalpa — in the interior, but historically oriented towards the south and the Pacific ocean, continued to be the seat of the state powers and most of the bureaucracy. The approach to subaltern groups in each region was significantly different. These differences are best understood by looking at the ways in which the Carías government’s motto “order and peace” was concretized in each space. According to the dictator himself,

The government that I have had the honor of presiding maintains and will remain unyielding in its resolution of saving Honduras for good from anarchy. Internecine revolt or permanent social agitation will never be allowed again to occupy a prominent place in national life, sacrificing useful beings, impeding progress and distorting ideas. For the demagogues, nonconformists of the current order that reigns in Honduras, Freedom and Democracy are synonyms of licentiousness and disorder. (quoted by Barahona 2005:107)

In the north coast and particularly in the case of the banana and railroad workers, order and peace meant bloody repression of any sort of revolt, strike or public demonstration against labor conditions, banana companies or the government (particular viciousness applied to sympathizers and members of the Communist Party or allied groups); this was the space of
capital, and order and peace would be understood in its terms. However, regarding of the rest of the country, Carías’s approach was paradoxically different. He treated Tegucigalpa’s artisans’ and government officials’ claims, for example, through negotiations and moderately progressive policies and distributed a certain amount of national lands to poor peasants (Barahona 2005; Argueta 2008).

Carías also succeeded in pacifying the country and bringing to a halt the constant revolts and armed clashes – 210 between 1892 and 1932 (Cáceres and Zelaya 2005:50) – that had wracked the country since independence. This of course had a significant economic impact, as “[t]he wars required the mobilization either government or opposing troops, supplied by the population dedicated to productive activities, basically the peasant population. This subtraction interrupted the productive processes, mainly agriculture” (Cáceres and Zelaya 2005:58).

With the concentration of power in Carías and the focus on order and peace, understood here above all as the lack of armed conflicts and the protection of private property, this situation began to change. In their study of the development of agriculture during Carías regime, Cáceres and Zelaya (2005) try to capture the impact that this situation had in economic terms. To do so, they divide in analytic terms the country into two spaces that they call the “Banana Republic” and the “Non-Banana Republic,” which basically refers to all of the country, outside of the banana producing departments of Colón, Atlántida, Yoro and Cortés. According to their data, the constant warring had had a significant effect in terms of de-capitalizing the Non-Banana Republic in terms of both production levels and demographic growth; at the same time that the Banana Republic capitalized around the banana plantations by attracting the impoverished population running away from conflicts and poverty in the rest of the country.28

28 These authors report that in the 1905-1926 period, while the Banana Republic showed a demographic growth of 3.73 percent, the Non Banana Republic recorded a much lower 1.26 percent (Cáceres and Zelaya 2005:74)
Besides the effect that this pacification had, Carías also began to use a heavy hand to make sure that agriculture would be reactivated. In this way, mainly in the Non-Banana Republic, the army commanders, besides their traditional law and order functions, were supposed to assure that the peasants dedicated certain extensions of land to the cultivation of beans, maize, other staple crops and small-scale animal husbandry. Carías also started a program in which national and ejido lands were given to poor peasants in usufruct to produce staple crops (Cáceres and Zelaya 2005; Argueta 2008). According to these same authors, with Carías’s militarized approach to agriculture and his focus on security and order, economic conditions in the Non-Banana Republic began to improve. In fact, between 1932 and 1948 the economy in this space grows an annual 3.8 percent, going from $44.1 to $80.9 million in that period (p. 81).

This coupling between discipline and order (property and personal security) was the basis of a certain economic growth in the Non-Banana Republic. According to Marvin Barahona, fear became the axiom of the dictatorial ideology. The dictator offered security in exchange for submission. It was recognized that Honduras had entered a period of political order and stability, but at the same time there was fear that any critique of the official ideology would imply repression. This ambiguity was one of the pillars of the dictatorship as well as the factor that divided the collective memory into two sides: those who felt secure and those who felt scared... (quoted by Cáceres and Zelaya 2005:86)

Going back to the question of hegemony, it is clear that Carías managed to remain in power 16 years by this combination of authoritarian order and economic stabilization. To do so, Carías exacerbated and controlled certain contradictions and tensions in the country to his advantage. Carías did not create the national fragmentation that in kind led to the differentiation between the Banana and Non-Banana Republics; in fact, he moved forward in trying to integrate the country through the construction of a telegraph system and other infrastructure. However, he was able to capitalize on this by having a politically differentiated approach to each space. On the one hand, military support to the banana companies on the
north coast meant that the conditions of reproduction of the most important economic activity in the country – from the elites’ perspective at least – would remain stable in the Banana Republic. On the other hand, quelling social and armed unrest in the Non-Banana Republic and promoting agricultural production had a similar effect, but by a different process. For the traditional elites, the separation between class and state meant that they could dedicate themselves to other activities – such as cattle ranching or commerce – without having to worry about their intra-elite opponents grabbing the state (understood as a rent capturing apparatus).

Importantly, Carías was able to use the large reserves of available ejido and national lands to securely fix an important sector of the peasantry on the land, without touching the lands of the elites. This fixing was important in three ways at least. First, it meant settling down population and made it difficult for opposing caudillos to conscript unhappy peasants for armed campaigns. Second, it meant increasing production of staple crops and thus lowered the price of labor on the national scale, as well as increasing commerce and economic activity. Third, and most importantly for my purposes, bridling their labor through access to land, and the active supervision of their work, meant restricting or limiting the tendencies towards flight that I have mentioned as one of the characteristics feature of the Honduran subaltern groups since the colonial period.

However here, we are also able to see the tensions intrinsic to domination by passive revolution. Consolidating the access to land of the peasantry meant that primitive accumulation

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29 As an apologist of the Carías regime would mention in 1946, “The leader [Carías] gave them [the peasants] work, forced them to echar raíces [literally, put down roots], to be bound with the maternal land and the harvests have become profitable, and the businesses of the petite bourgeoisie have become enriched…” (Filánder Díaz Chávez, quoted by Argueta 2008:109).

30 Although it is impossible to give a single explanation, this situation – access to national lands by peasants – goes a long way toward explaining why in Honduras, unlike El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, there were no significant armed rural movements in the 1970s and 1980s (see, Brockett 1990; Dunkerley 1988; Gould 1990; Grandin 2011; Schulz and Schulz Sundloff 1994).
– in terms of both living and past labor (Marx 1993) – would not be a possibility; thus, this policy stunted and delayed the development of a capitalist agricultural sector, as we will see later. In terms of capital accumulation and particularly in terms of rent capturing, all of the eggs would be placed in the banana industry’s basket, which of course, meant neglecting or leaving aside other important groups and dynamics that were also being developed in the country.

**The short-lived democratization of the passive revolution (I): “Honduras’s Paris Commune” (1954)**

Towards the mid-1940s, the opposition against Carías began to mount. The dictator really did not have much to fear from within, however, as none of the opposing social groups was really capable of disputing his reign either politically or militarily. The regional context, as well as U.S.’s approach to the regime, was shifting in a significant manner. After 1944 the Central American dictators’ club was down to Carías and the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, as both Martinez in El Salvador and Ubico had been forcefully removed from power.

This situation had emboldened the Honduran opposition, which in that same year organized a set of marches in both Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, asking for Carías to step down. One of the most dramatic episodes in this period took place on San Pedro Sula on July 6, as thousands of students, housewives and members of the commercial and urban middle classes took to the streets to protest. The regime violently repressed the march by firing against the crowd with a final toll of around 22 people killed (Barahona 2005). Further, on October 14 of that same year, a group of around 200 exiles entered the country from El Salvador in an attempt to topple the government, but was repelled by the military. From 1945 onwards, the opposition – a combination of the urban middle class, the industrial and commercial petite bourgeoisie and the labor movement – began to organize in political parties to push for reform. Probably the most important was the Revolutionary and Democratic Honduran Party (PRDH), whose
members would eventually recreate the defunct Honduran Communist Party and organizing the more left-oriented faction of the Liberal Party from the 1950s onwards.\textsuperscript{31}

At the same time as domestic opposition was mounting, the U.S. approach to the region and particularly to dictatorial regimes was also changing. After World War II and in the context of the Cold War, the U.S. shifted its discourse towards the promotion of democracy. In the case of Honduras, from 1946 onwards, the U.S. began to make clear that it preferred a change of government in the country.

In early 1948 Tiburcio Carías made clear that he would be stepping down and elections were planned for October. The initial optimism with which as the Liberal Party opposition received this news dwindled as time went by. In the end, José Angel Zúñiga Huete, the candidate of the Liberal Party, decided to pull out of the contest, in the midst of complaints regarding the electoral rolls. Thus, Juan Manuel Gálvez – Minister of War under Carías and UFCO’s former lawyer – was elected president.

This political transition must also be understood against the backdrop of certain structural changes. In the aftermath of World War II, the international prices of bananas recovered somewhat, which meant an increase in both the extension of land cultivated and the size of the labor force. It also meant an improved fiscal situation for the government. At the same time, the U.S.’s war effort had also opened up a space for the introduction and development of new crops, such as beef, cotton in the south, oil palms, cocoa and Manila hemp in the north, and the spread and increase in the cultivation of coffee in most regions of the country. These changes would have a particularly important effect towards the end of the 1940s, but particularly from the 1950s onwards, as they would come to diversify the economic

\textsuperscript{31} The Communist Party of Honduras was originally created in 1922 in the north coast in the city of San Pedro Sula. However, by the 1940s and due mainly to the repression unleashed by the Carías regime, the party had stopped operating. It would not be until April, 10 1954, that the “new” Communist Party would be formed in the city of San Pedro Sula.
structure. Three elements are important to mention. First, with economic diversification dependency on the bananas industry declined, which would eventually translate into a different sort of relationship between government and companies (Bucheli 2006). Second, the fact that a significant part of this diversification was agricultural meant that the traditional elite could modernize and shift into new kinds of production. Third, and closely related to the latter point, the protection of ejido and smallholder lands would become a barrier to the further expansion of the new agricultural export activities, which meant the “freeing” up of labor, which could either be absorbed as wage labor or would migrate and extend the agrarian frontier.

Gálvez’s government was envisioned as one of transition towards democracy, but also towards economic and state modernization. From day one the former UFCO lawyer claimed that his government would focus on developing the agricultural sector and the internal market. The idea was simple: improve transportation infrastructure, basically roads, to connect the foodstuff production in the interior with the larger north coast cities and markets. Also, under the tutelage of the IFIs (World Bank and IMF) – Honduras signed an agreement in 1945 – Gálvez’s government began a process of institutional modernization that included the development of a national banking system to stimulate the economy, a reform of the educational system, and various policies that eventually would crystallize in the 1959 labor code, among others.

Although Gálvez maintained a heavy-handed approach to dissent, this was a period in which the levels of labor organization – particularly on the north coast – continued to increase. Despite intense repression, from the early 1950s onwards, several strikes and strike attempts took place in the different banana plantations, but also in related branches such as the railroads. Tensions continued to build up in a context dominated by nationalist feelings and anti-imperialist denunciations against the banana companies and particularly against the “octopus” (UFCO). In early May, 1954 the tensions peaked, as thousands of UFCO workers launched a strike led by Communists, left-wing liberals of the PRDH and with the moral and financial support of the San Pedro Sula bourgeoisie (Euraque 1996). This strike should not be seen as a
spontaneous or surprising event. It was the result of a long arch of over 40 years of workers’ grievances, against the constant abuse and the companies’ refusal to permit any sort of economic or social rights in the plantations. As the U.S. journalist and well known politician Henry Wallace observed, “...the odd thing about the 1954 strike was not that it took place in that year; the surprising thing is that it had not begun twenty years before” (Barahona 2005:168).

The initial reaction of the government was a sort of carrot and the stick approach in which both military troops were deployed and a negotiating commission was named. However, the discipline and determination of the more than 25,000 striking workers, so vividly depicted by Ramón Amaya Amador (1988) in his novel Red Detachment [Destacamento Rojo], did not falter and they took over the banana towns and paralyzed the industry. Among the demands the workers presented were the right to organize unions, a significant wage increase and better working conditions. The company’s initial response was to try and delay the negotiating process and to break the strike. At the same time,

...the banana towns had turned into a political stage governed by popular power. Marches and public manifestations, massive assemblies in the football fields, political discourses, collective kitchens [ollas populares], music and poetry by the people’s bards animated the workers protest. (Barahona 2005:169)

In July, after two months of being on strike it was clear that the workers would not simply give in to the company’s pressure. Thus, Gálvez was forced to intercede and sit together with the representatives of both the UFCO and the workers to negotiate an agreement that would bring the strike to the end. For the labor movement, this was more a political than an economic victory, as only a bare minimum of the strikers’ demands were actually satisfied; but it opened the door for the legalization of labor organizing in the entire country. It also meant the entry into the political arena – in the sense of becoming an actor that had to be seriously taken into account in the hegemony conversation – of organized labor, as well as the incipient industrial bourgeoisie of San Pedro Sula. The strike also became a blueprint to follow for other actors, such as the peasant movement, in their forms of protest and negotiation with the
government. It comes as no wonder that Ramón Amaya Amador, one of the most important Communist Party intellectuals of this period, would later characterize the strike as Honduras’s “Paris Commune” (quoted by Euraque 1996:71).

At the same time that this was happening in Honduras, in Guatemala president Jacobo Arbenz was being ousted by a CIA-orchestrated coup. Known as the Guatemalan Revolution, the Arbenz government promoted a set of reformist policies, including an agrarian reform and a labor code. The UFCO and the traditional land owning elite saw these policies as a threat and thus were quite supportive and active during the coup (Handy 1994; Grandin 2011; Gleijeses 1992). This situation also had an important impact in Honduras. Not only had the more progressive sector in the country – read those against the regime – seen the Guatemalan Revolution with hope and sympathy, but also the traditional elites were afraid that it could spread into Honduras. When the 1954 strike broke out, the first suspicions were directed at Arbenz’s government. Thus, Gálvez’s government supported the Guatemalan coup by allowing its territory to be the launching pad for the Guatemalan counter-revolution. In exchange, the Honduran army received increasing U.S. support and, as Barahona (2005:173) mentions, it also “…inaugurated a tradition in which Honduras would take on the role of the territorial base of the Central American counter-revolution.”

_The short lived democratization of the passive revolution (II): Villeda Morales and the path towards political ascendency of the military_

After the 1954 strike, it became evident that the political dynamic was changing, that coercion by itself would no longer be enough to maintain dominance in the country and that some shift towards the creation of consensus would be needed. Several elements were important here. First of all, as I just mentioned, the strike had signaled the entry of new actors onto the political stage. Second, there had been a renewal of the Liberal Party’s leadership around Ramón Villeda Morales, which in part reflected the ascent of these new social groups as well as presenting a new political discourse favoring a more active role for the state in the national economy. Third,
the Honduran army was also in a process of change, as it modernized and as a new group of better trained leaders were coming up the rank and file. Fourth, during August and September of that same year, strong rains and flooding had destroyed a significant part of the banana production in the country. The banana companies responded by abandoning large amounts of land and introduced technological changes that led to the dismissal of around 13,000 workers (almost half of the total workforce). This combination of idle land and massive landlessness set the stage for combative peasant movements that not only sought to access land, but also protection for their tenure against the attempts of landowners to evict them (Posas 1981 see also; Carney 1985). Finally, the National Party, the dominant political force since Carías and a traditional ally of U.S. interests in the country, was in the decline.

In October 1956, when Julio Lozano Díaz, who had taken over the presidency after Gálvez retired in 1954, rigged the elections to try to remain in power, the military decided to stage a coup. A constituent assembly was then organized in which the armed forces struck a deal with the Liberal Party: in exchange securing a Villeda Morales government – who had gotten most of the votes in the October election, although not a clear majority – the constitution would be amended to allow the military autonomy from civilian power. With this constitutional change and the coup, the army rose to be the new political arbitrator, as well as creating a situation of dual military and civilian government that would eventually be reconfigured with another coup in 1963. Moreover, the military, not the National Party, would become the new local partner of the U.S.

During this period, and particularly after the Cuban revolution in 1959, the U.S.’s approach to Latin America shifted significantly. First of all, we have Eisenhower in August 1958 making for the first time an emphatic statement in favor of representative governments in the region. Later that year he approved the establishment of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) – which, as we will see in the next chapter, played an important role in the creation of the Bajo Aguán Project –, and in early 1959 he extended his backing to the Central American
Common Market (CACM), albeit using the IADB as a financial lever to press for policies compatible with U.S. interests (Euraque 1996). After the Cuban revolution and the election of Kennedy as president, these policies crystallized further in the form of the Alliance for Progress in 1961. The Alliance promoted a set of development goals (economic growth, decreasing poverty, macroeconomic stability), as well as institutional transformations (democratic governments, agrarian reforms) that together would bring socio-political stability and thus undercut the communist threat that supposedly was hanging over all the countries.

Villeda Morales took power in early 1957, and with this government came the formal rise to power of some of the groups that had been most active in opposition to Cariás and the National Party, as well as a new generation of army officers, led by Oswaldo López Arellano, the newly appointed chief of the armed forces. From the beginning, these changes brought an increasing state role in the economy. Some of the most important reforms were the passing of an industrial promotion law, the 1959 labor code and the creation in 1961 of the National Agrarian Institute (INA). Levels of repression diminished and the government brought moved closer to organized labor, promoting those unions close to the moderate ORIT and suppressing anything that smelled even slightly leftist. By late 1961, Villeda established a local counterpart to the Alliance for Progress, called “The March towards Progress.” With financial support from the IADB, this project was controlled by a group of technocrats drawn from the San Pedro Sula bourgeoisie and turned towards a deepening of the modernizing agenda. While these other aspects of Villeda’s agenda were important, here I will focus solely on the agrarian reform.

In part due to the increasing pressure from peasants on the north coast after the 1954 strike and the later technological fix by the UFCO, in 1962 the Honduran government passed an Agrarian Reform Law. Influenced by Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, the Law had two main objectives: modernization of agriculture and channeling peasant unrest in the countryside into market-oriented production. Further, the Law both opened up a legal space for peasant demands for land and production assistance (credit and technical support, among others) and
defined very clear structural limits to these demands. Far from redistributing land in the hands of big landowners, such as the banana companies, the law focused on the distribution of national and ejido (municipal) lands to peasant families. It was only in those cases where it would be proven that the land was not fulfilling its “social function” that the state in the form of the National Agrarian Institute (INA) would intercede, buying land from the original owners and redistributing it. According to Posas (1981), from this moment onwards peasant mobilization has aimed to “re recuperate”32 national, ejido, or idle lands rather than privately held properties. Further, it is important to point out that the rhythms and levels of land distribution and redistribution have been determined by the changing intensity of peasant pressure “from below” and government action “from above.”

No matter how limited the scope of the new agrarian reform, it was forcefully rejected and resisted by both the banana companies – the UFCO actually claimed that it put Honduras “on the path of Cuba and Communist China” (Edwin M. Martin, quoted by Eurqaue 1996:113) – and the traditional land owning elite based in and around Tegucigalpa. This opposition coalesced in three differentiated but related currents. First, it was part of broader resistance that these elites and UFCO directed from day one at Villeda’s government, his branch of liberalism and his supposed sympathy with the Cuban revolution. Second, clearly, even if the Agrarian Reform did not touch directly the lands of the large landowners and the banana companies, it created a framework in which the peasant organizations’ practice of “re recuperating” land could be legitimized. I would add further, that with this law, the differentiation between the Banana

32 The notion of land recuperation has a deeply political content in Latin America. In the particular Honduran context, it is used by peasant organizations – and their sympathizers – to signal that the land that is being occupied was or should be national and thus patrimony of the Honduran poor peasantry (Posas 1981). This is also part of a broader political and semantic battle, in which right-wing actors and mainstream media tend to refer to those same land occupations in terms of “invasions” or “land usurpation.” Oversimplifying, we could say that the tension between private property and common good (in terms of the nation) structures this semantic field and the political struggles around it.
and Non-Banana republics that I mentioned before began to be erased in agrarian terms. Carias had always been very careful to craft his agrarian policies so that the north coast was excluded. However, in the 1960s, not only was the north coast the hotbed of national agrarian conflict, but the banana industry’s economic importance was decreasing, as new sectors expanded. Finally, Villeda’s government, and particularly the agrarian reform, called into question the pacts and understandings that held together the domination arrangement in the country. Phrased differently, the government’s policies were seen as going against the various equilibriums that held together the question of hegemony. It was good to include new groups into the political arena, but this inclusion had to be done within a set of limits and always mediated, at least according to those older powers that had derived their position of strength from the concentration of land.

At the end, on October 3, 1963, a few days before the end of his term, Villeda Morales was ousted and, creating what would become a sort of tradition, was exiled to Costa Rica by the military and the chief of the armed forces, Oswaldo López Arellano, whom the Liberal Power had helped to consolidate in power. This was a bloody coup, in which the alliance between the military and the National Party went after the Liberal Party members and the social bases of the ousted government with unprecedented viciousness. With this coup, the question of dual power between civil and military government came to be temporarily resolved in favor in the latter. Just as in 1932, the concentration of power around a single actor who could operate as political arbitrator and upheld the powers that became the “solution” to the national political crisis. Also, the coup came to show very clearly the limit of the hegemonic problematic in Honduras: any change would necessarily be done from above and popular participation would be kept to a minimum.
The rise to power of the military

Darío Euraque (1996:114) observes that “…the nationalists’ participation in the 1963 coup reflected their efforts to arrest the liberals’ increasing influence over modern Honduran politics and the state, especially given the economic prominence of the industrializing North Coast.”

Euraque further argues that López Arellano’s regime can be read as one of an increasing dispute between the San Pedro Sula-based industrial bourgeoisie and the traditional landowning elite organized around the political capital of Tegucigalpa. This reading shifts the axis of the conflict towards the differentiation between the interior and the north coast that I already mentioned. Also, it indicates that the institutional development experienced by the country in the postwar period was the key arena of this dispute. The role of the military as both arbitrator of the conflict and definer of the balance of scales between both forces (schematically, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa) became central. At the same time, besides stunting the increasing influence of the industrial bourgeoisie within the Tegucigalpa-centric political arena, the coup was directed at making sure that the influence of subaltern groups such as an independent organized labor and peasant movements would remain outsiders. In this way, the alliance between superordinate and subordinate groups was deactivated and thus the comfort zone of the passive revolution could be recreated.

The response to the coup was immediate, as the different groups that had been affected tried to resist the repression. Noteworthy in this direction were the ephemeral alliances between Liberals and Communists, as they attempted to create a “unified front” against the coup. However, as Euraque points out, the Liberals’ leadership was slow and hesitant about calling for a popular revolt. Other groups opted for military resistance and guerrilla-type movements, but these attempts were forcefully stifled and repressed by the military in both the cities and the countryside. The culminating moment of these resistance efforts came in April 1965, when the military massacred seven members of the Popular Action Front (FAP) – including Lorenzo
Zelaya, former leader of the National Peasant Federation of Honduras (FENACH) – in the hamlet of El Jute in the department of Yoro.33

Eventually López Arellano’s military regime managed to achieve a modicum of legal legitimacy in 1965, when a constituent assembly elected him president. The new regime did not close down any of the economic institutions created during Villeda’s government, but they did not manifest any interest in putting them to work or further strengthening the incipient and deeply dysfunctional developmentalist state. This is a clear example of how the coup was much more oriented towards changing those at the steering wheel than the actual vehicle.

This forced those sectors whose interests were attached to the developmentalist project – namely the industrial bourgeoisie and organized labor on the north coast – to create a common political platform to defend their interests. Initially, the 1968 municipal elections were seen as an important opportunity. However, according to the Liberal opposition, these were rigged, particularly in San Pedro Sula – the stronghold of the industrial bourgeoisie – where the Liberals were confident of victory but nonetheless lost. This event led to an even stronger articulation among opposition forces, which led in late 1968 to a general strike on the north coast.

The reason for the strike was the signing by the government of the “San José Protocol,” an attempt to revamp and strengthen the Central American Common Market. However, this protocol negatively impacted Honduras’s incipient industries – some of the weakest in the isthmus –, as it lowered the level of commercial protection within the Central American region. This was particularly the case with El Salvador, who had become the most important regional trading partner of Honduras in the last few years and could benefit the most from the new Protocol. Further, it was easy to read the effects of this Protocol in relation to the tensions between the north coast and the country’s interior. At the same time that the lowering of tariffs

33 For a first-hand testimony of the massacre, see García (1991).
affected industrial production from the north coast, it was good news for the agrarian sector – sugar and beef producers for example – as they enjoyed a certain competitive advantage with the rest of the region. The López Arellano coup was specifically directed at the type of political alliances articulated around the developmentalist project, as the conservative land owning elites also benefited from policies aimed at the diversification of the economic structure.

During the 1968 general strike, most of the stores in San Pedro Sula closed and workers also stopped their activities. The reaction by the regime was vicious, with the army being mobilized, the closing of the media close to the strikers and many protestors imprisoned. The strike prefigured what was to come, as it was the result of the concerted effort of the industrial bourgeoisie and the organized anticommunist labor movement, an alliance that would become important after 1972, as we will see towards the end of this chapter.

The strike also indicated the effects of continuing to support the sole interests of the large landowning elites in the interior to the detriment of those of industrial capital, organized labor on the north coast, and the peasant movement. Organized peasants were becoming more active and aggressive in both the north coast and the interior, where the cotton and beef industries – with significant technical and financial support from the new state agencies – were fueling new processes of land concentration and dispossession (Boyer 1982). In general, it was evident that towards the end of the 1960s Honduras was entering a situation similar to the one described by Gramsci (1971:275–76) as a “crisis of authority”:

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

Following this thread, I would argue further that actually the art of the passive revolution is to sustain that interregnum, but without it becoming evident that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In any case, in the Honduran case, it seemed that the crisis could and would
only be resolved by force. Just as peasant organizations were pushing the limits of the reformist policies and being very active on the ground, the large landowners struck back, leaving their usual isolation and organizing to lobby the government for changes to the agrarian legislation through the National Federation of Farmers and Cattlemen of Honduras (FENAGH), created in 1966 (Sieder 1995).

As early as 1967, it became evident that the dominant groups in the country were looking for an alternative resolution: the internationalization of internal tensions. Since the initial expansion of the plantation economy in the north coast, Honduras had become a magnet for a steady flow of poor Salvadorian peasants in search of the land or work that they could not find back home. By 1969 Honduras was host to between 250,000 and 300,000 Salvadorans in search of land. El Salvador is the smallest Central American country, but has historically shown some of the highest population densities in the Americas. This situation, combined with a landed oligarchy that, just like its Honduran counterpart, based its social reproduction in the high concentration of land, made the outmigration towards their eastern neighbors the only viable safety valve for its own agrarian pressures (Durham 1979).

Just as Honduras was entering its own agrarian crisis in the late 1960s, El Salvador was facing increasing pressure from an impoverished peasantry – in the late 1960s, 60 percent of the country’s land was in the hands of 2 percent of the population (Anderson 1983) – and the political impossibility of entertaining the idea of a redistributive agrarian reform. Thus,

Between early 1967 and the [Salvadoran] invasion of 1969, a number of contradictions associated with both countries’ transitions to peripheral capitalism adversely affected sectors of each country’s elites and their historic reluctance to deal with land problems. (Euraque 1996:140)

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34 In 1970 the country had a population of over 3.5 million people, with a population density of 170 people per square kilometer (Anderson 1983).
In Honduras, by late 1967, organized landowners called for the expulsion of Salvadoran squatters as a way of dealing with the peasants’ increasing political activity. The evictions began towards mid-1969 and by July, Honduran authorities had deported around 20,000 Salvadorans. At least one sector of the Salvadoran oligarchy was calling for an invasion of Honduras as a way of dealing with the internal problems that would be exacerbated with the returnees (Euraque 1996). The tensions between both countries continued to mount, including the persecution of Salvadorans living in Honduras by “white guards” and attacks on the Honduran national football team in June after a World Cup qualifying match that was won by the Salvadorans.

On July 14, 1969, the Salvadoran army invaded Honduras, in what came to be known as the “Football War,” or the “100-Hour War.” Initially the invading army was able to push deep into Honduran territory. However, as the Honduran military, and particularly the air force, recovered from the initial surprise and the population moved en masse to protect the country’s sovereignty, the conflict was brought to a stalemate. By July 18 the OAS had negotiated an end to the fighting, and by early August the Salvadoran troops had left Honduran territory.

This conflict significantly impacted both countries, but for my purposes, I will focus on three aspects on the Honduran side. First, the armed conflict mobilized Honduran nationalist sentiment, papering over for a moment all of the internal antagonisms and conflicts. Second, and related to the previous point, the war brought the popular sectors – the Honduran Labor Central (CTH), for example – closer to the armed forces, which were seen as the guardians of the nation, as against the traditional parties – the “oligarchs” – whose policies had led the country to this debacle. Much as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990) suggests in the case of Haiti, it could be argued that “state” and “nation” came to be separated and pitted against each other, with the military taking on the role of protecting the latter from the short-sighted interests of the elites festering within the former. Third, the war was seen as a failure by the Honduran Armed Forces, particularly by the younger officers – most of whom had studied abroad – who placed the blame on the older leadership. Further, the conflict allowed this younger generation to enter in contact
with the population in general. These two elements together opened up a space for this younger generation to gain more relevance within the military as a whole and shifted its approach to national security. It is worth mentioning that members of this younger generation of officers had been deeply influenced by what they saw in Panama and Peru, where military governments had taken an active role in the modernizing of their countries in the name of social justice. This was the mindset and model that they wanted to bring to Honduras.

Political space opened up somewhat in the aftermath of the “Soccer War,” as local tensions eased. In 1971, in the aftermath of the war and under a supposed banner of “national unity,” the military took on the commitment of holding democratic elections and ceding power to a civilian government. These elections took place in April, 1971, and Ramón Cruz was elected president. From the beginning, Cruz’s administration was tarnished by accusations of corruption and problems negotiating distribution of government appointments and the national budget between the two traditional parties (Liberal and National parties), in what came to be known as the pactito (“little pact”). At the same time, Cruz was accused of not moving forward with some of the reforms that the country needed, particularly agrarian reform, resolving the border conflict with El Salvador and the adoption of a more favorable trade policy in the Central American Common Market. Nevertheless, probably the straw that broke the camel’s back was the significant increase of peasant protest and unrest, demanding an immediate agrarian reform. According to Marvin Barahona (2005:221)

Towards the end of 1972, the peasant organizations threatened to carry out ‘hunger marches’ from the rural communities all the way to Tegucigalpa if their demands were not heeded. On December 4, 1972, before the peasant marches began, the military promoted a new coup d’état and ousted the tottering civilian regime.
Military reformism as passive revolution

Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they'll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change. D'you understand?

Fabrizio, prince of Salina to his nephew and heir Tancredi
Giuseppe Tomasi Di Lampedusa (2007:19), The Leopard.

Presenting my argument so far in a more schematic way, we could say that as the 1950s and 1960s rolled in, the Honduran political field was organized around two main poles and four other key actors. In terms of the poles, we had the National Party – which came to represent the more traditional economic interests of the landowning elite, based mainly in the interior of the country and around the nation’s capital – and the Liberal Party, whose history was deeply intertwined with that of new social groups – particularly the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie – based around San Pedro Sula and the north coast. The other actors were the military, which after the 1956 had emerged as an important political actor; the organized labor and peasant movements, whose presence became much more active after the 1954 strike; the banana plantations, whose political influence was rather diminished, due mainly to their decreased weight in the national economy; and the U.S., whose support continued to be crucial for any sort of hegemonic alliance.

From 1956 and until 1963, the military, in a bid to acquire greater political autonomy and power, backed the incipient alliance between the Liberal Party and organized labor to the detriment of the National Party and the banana companies. However, the new regime’s policy began to place severe stress on the set of balances and counterbalances that sustained the forms of domination, and threatened to rip apart what we could call the hegemonic fabric. In this context, the military made a new wager, one that could allow it to further increase and consolidate its power, at the same time as normalizing the political situation again and shifted its loyalty towards the National Party. This shift not only meant reorganizing the alliances and the balance of forces, but also excluding (organized labor) and diminishing the influence (banana companies) of the two odd-out actors.
The exclusion of these two actors – labor and the banana companies — merits further analysis. In the case of organized labor and the peasant movement, this exclusion was based both on a visceral anticommunist sentiment shared by the rest of the actors (from the two traditional parties to the U.S.’s post-Cuban revolution posture), as well as the always insurmountable distance that existed between social classes. In the case of the banana companies, their alliance with the government, particularly during the Carías period, was based upon their ability to provide a steady flow of income and some economic stability. However, once this was no longer the case, governments would opportunistically shift their alliances and mobilize popular nationalist sentiment against the companies (Bucheli 2006). Further, the fact that much of the protest in this period concentrated in rural areas and was organized around the struggle for land necessarily placed the banana companies and their massive extensions of reserve lands squarely in the middle of the disputes.

The military government that took over after the 1972 coup had to operate with these constraints and pressures. The war against El Salvador had given great legitimacy to the armed forces as the defenders of the nation. This legitimacy was further consolidated by the open support given by the most important sectors of the labor and peasant movements and the industrial bourgeoisie, which saw in this rise to power the possibility of advancing its political agenda. The cycle of coercion and restitution that had dominated most of the last two decades was giving way to a period characterized by more consent. This would, however, be a controlled consent, in which the military would play the role of arbiter, defining the checks and balances and granting space for new interests and agendas to be included, but in a highly controlled manner. The path to modernization would be passive and revolutionary at the same time:
“Between 1972 and 1978, patron-client relationships were restructured, recreated and selectively extended in an attempt to incorporate emergent social actors on the terms of those controlling the balance of power within the reformist state, providing the latter with limited but nonetheless significant degree of legitimacy” (Sieder 1995:113).

Much has been written on the topic of the military reformist regime that governed Honduras between 1972 and 1979 (see for example, Posas and Del Cid 1980; Sieder 1995). For my purposes I will limit myself to discussing its approach to agrarian conflict. First of all, since the trigger of the coup had been agrarian, the new government responded immediately by pushing forward and responding to the peasant movement’s demands. On December 26, barely three weeks after coming to power, the Armed Forces proclaimed Decree no. 8 as an emergency measure. This Decree ordered that all agricultural land owned by the state should be placed under the control of the National Agrarian Institute (INA) and given to landless peasant families. Further, the decree also proclaimed that those lands that were not being properly used – that is, idle – would be leased to peasant families that needed them. The relative success in applying this decree resulted mainly because of the peasant movement’s relentless activity, “recuperating” national lands and receiving the brunt of the landowners’ violent response, even though the peasants’ actions were almost always limited to that land undeniably under state ownership (Ríos 2014).

Two years later, in 1974, the military government passed a new agrarian reform law. In the bill, the country’s agrarian sector was characterized as having three different tiers: the traditional sector, basically small subsistence-oriented producers, who were considered to be obsolete; the modern sector, comprised of technologically developed productive units (basically the agroexport sector); and the contemporary sector, formed by the new and yet to be developed peasant enterprises (cooperatives, peasant leagues, and community peasant enterprises, among others).
The objective of the agrarian reform, then, was to eliminate the traditional sector and the tension between capitalist and non-capitalist production. In this way, the law claimed, productivity levels would increase, creating multiplier effects that would lead to more efficient use of natural resources, a better distribution of the benefits of these resources, cheaper and better access to food, increased income for the poor peasantry, an expansion of the domestic market and commerce, better health conditions for the population, and incentives to promote industrialization (Ríos 2014).

In practical terms, these objectives were hardly reached, as the final result differed greatly from the initial, overly ambitious goals (see below). Moreover, the whole process became a bit tricky for the military government, as it had to maneuver between the peasant organizations’ relentless pressure on the ground and the right-wing National Federation of Farmers and Cattlemen (FENAGH), which made persistent efforts to limit and bring the reform to a halt. Following a pattern that was repeated all over Latin America, the solution was to emphasize distribution of national land – in part, the relative massiveness of the Honduran reform had to do with the large amounts of national lands that it still had – and the promotion of colonization projects.

The agrarian reform in Honduras lasted from 1962 to 1992. Its “golden age” was in the 1970s and particularly between 1973 and 1977, when over 120,000 hectares were distributed. In total, 409,000 hectares – 12.3 percent of the country’s farm land – were distributed among 60,000 families; about 13 percent of the rural population. However, as massive as this reform was, it was unable to fully address the problems of inequality in access to land (Boyer 2010).

According to the 1993 agrarian census, over 126,000 rural families (27 percent of the rural population) did not have access either to land or a permanent job (FIAN 2000). I will return in different parts of this study to this topic, but before continuing, it is important to point out several things. There was nothing particularly new here, as the agrarian reform was part of a generalized framework of development through import substitution industrialization and the
role assigned to agriculture within it; employment generation was not a top priority of this approach (Thiesenhusen and others 1995). The Honduran agrarian is usually viewed as part of reforms promoted by the Alliance for Progress, whose main political objective was to distribute land as a way of diffusing agrarian conflicts that could lead to revolutionary outcomes, as in Cuba (Kay 1998). As much as I agree with these interpretations, however, I think that we should also think about the Honduran agrarian reform as process of labor capture.

By labeling as “productive” – and thus desirable – only market-oriented production, the agrarian reform in effect called for the formal capitalist subsumption of the “traditional” sector. In other words, peasant households and communities would articulate with the national economy by producing commodities for sale on the market. This meant devaluing non-commodified and non-monetized labor, as well as separating the realms of production and reproduction. As we will see in the next two chapters, this would have a significant impact in the relationships between men and women, as the work of the latter would become devalued and demoted to the domestic and reproductive spheres.

Several mechanisms enforced this shift towards production for the market. The first and most important one was debt. In general, the agrarian reform did not just give land for free to the peasant families, but instead provided loans eventually had to be paid to the state. From the beginning, reform beneficiaries needed some sort of monetary income to keep up with payments. Further, as we will see in the next chapter, this requirement in turn gave state institutions a powerful lever for determining what would be produced. While this is not unlike Carías’s approach to the promotion of agriculture, the dictator used the overt compulsion of the armed forces, while the agrarian reform used the silent compulsion of the market.

The other main way in which production for the market was enforced was by reshaping of the Honduran peasant subject. First, the agrarian reform decided that land would not be given individually, as this would only reinforce the “natural” tendency of the Honduran peasantry towards selfishness and individuality. Second, along with the distribution of land
came a process of training, carried out mainly by the Peasant Training Program for Land Reform (PROCCARA). Following the lead of Brazilian sociologist Clodomir Santos de Morais, PROCCARA carried out a set of Organization Workshops,\(^{35}\) in which the members of the new collective enterprises learned about the superiority of collective over individual labor and how best to learn to trust each other and work together. They learned about administrative principles, how to enforce discipline and how best to divide chores among themselves (Carmen and Sobrado 2000).

Labor capture is not only about creating material conditions for capital accumulation; it is also about creating the right subjective characteristics in the would-be laboring subject. The process of agrarian reform took thousands of peasant families, many of them used to self-provisioning, and turned them into members of market-oriented cooperatives. In the process, a new peasant subject emerged: one that was disciplined and able to work collectively, but also “fixed” to a particular geographical place, as the promise of betterment was linked to remaining in the cooperative. The emerging peasant subject was also linked to a particular social space, as his role he was assigned in the development of the nation was to be an efficient producer of foodstuffs and raw materials.

Seen in abstract terms, no primitive accumulation took place, but rather the opposite, as land was given “back” to the peasantry. However, this land was given within a scheme that would curtail peasants’ traditional sense of autonomy. More importantly, from the perspective of uneven geographical development (Smith 2008), dispossession in the west and south – where elites encroached on peasants’ lands from the 1950s onwards – created agrarian conflicts elsewhere as the troublesome “freed” landless peasantry migrated, felling the forest and expanding the agrarian frontier. This internal migration, of course, resulted to a significant

\(^{35}\) By 1976 a total of 17,400 peasants participated in these workshops, representing around 39 percent of all beneficiaries up to that point.
of the centrality that colonization projects had within the Honduran agrarian reform. Of these, the Bajo Aguán Project was the largest and most ambitious.

The next two chapters are dedicated to exploring the BAP and how this broad process of land capture by agrarian reform took place. One of the BAP’s main effects was to unleash economic and social forces – formal subsumption to the market, monetization of subsistence, disciplining and control of labor, palm oil production – that would forever change the lives of the families involved. The ways men and women experienced these processes were significantly different. Further, it is in the BAP that we must look for the conditions of possibility of both the wave of agrarian conflict that shook the region just before (and that continued after) the 2009 coup and the development of the transnationalized palm oil empire that came to dominate the Aguán landscape and to exercise outsized influence in the country’s politics.
Chapter 2. The nature of agrarian conflict: kinship, internal migration and the creation of the Aguán (1972-1998)

And well, my dad is from there [Copán], and they told my dad to come from there, right? Always searching, because the lands were barren [quemados], very little money to be made. I mean, very little where one can make some money, because there are no jobs. So, they came, searching for the Coast, that is how they call it here, “let’s go to the Coast.”

Gonzalo

But what happened is that there was a lot of timber: cedar, mahogany and that was exclusively from there... So he [the INA organizer] told us: look here, we cannot give you these lands, but we already have lots ready for you, prepared land in Colón. There – he said – we are going to give each family 10 hectares of land to work individually. We are going to give each associate 10 hectares for them to work... That really made us happy, because we did not have anywhere to work. So we decided to set up a legal commission. The problem began when we got here...

Marcelo

The organization began with [hurricane] Fifi, because we were left with our arms crossed [idle, unemployed], after the river flooded [la llena] and we lived close to the river. Aha, we were left then with almost nothing. And then, after a time I came to Colón, with the idea of coming here.

Eugenia

One thing is for sure, for Gonzalo, Marcelo and Eugenia, life had not panned out as they had expected or hoped. Born into poverty, their existence has so far been one of constant struggle: struggle in motion – as they migrated from their hometowns in the mountains in the western region of the country towards the fertile lands of Colón. The struggled with “nature” – as they brought down forests to grow maize and oil palms –; they struggled against capital – as they fought to “recover” land from the claws of a group of wealthy “foreign” landowners; they struggled against the state, which more often than not took the side of the few with plenty against the many with want. In brief, a constant struggle against poverty and dispossession not only marked their personal existence, but would also be central to the shared experience of the waves of peasant families that flocked to the Aguán from the 1960s onwards in search of a piece of land and a better life.
This chapter focusses on these struggles. By tracking the life trajectories of Gonzalo, Marcelo and Eugenia, and their shared experiences, I will analyze the ways in which the dynamics of the production of nature, labor capture and internal migration came together in the creation of the Aguán region. Phrased differently, by looking at the struggle in motion of these families, I hope to show the very particular and highly contingent ways in which the necessary – for capital accumulation, that is – flows of labor, capital and land were assembled and interrupted by the actions of the different groups involved, thus creating the particular landscape of the region. One of the main arguments I make is that far from representing an escape from dispossession and labor capture, the journey of these families towards Colón became a reenactment of a similar process in a different context.

The chapter sets out to characterize two dominant, albeit different, flows of immigration into the Aguán region, which began in the 1970s. On the one hand, as the accounts of Eugenia and Marcelo exemplify, an induced and state-sponsored colonization project, which brought organized peasants from other regions in the country, created a set of cash crop-oriented (mainly palm oil and citrus trees) peasant coops in the lowlands of the valley, where the most fertile and accessible lands could be found. On the other, as in the case of Gonzalo, unorganized and informal migrations of impoverished peasant families that arrived in the region at the same time, mainly through long processes of phased migration, ended up settling in the hills surrounding the valley and growing staple crops (mainly maize, beans and cassava) for self-provisioning.

**Countryside in flux: mobility and organization as responses to dispossession**

The 1960s was a decade of increasing agrarian conflict in the Honduran countryside. In the aftermath of the 1954 general strike, two main dynamics were evident: on the one hand, an ever increasing conflict between large landowners and peasants barely contained by the government. On the other, the military’s increasing participation in government, particularly after the 1964
coup and its rise to formal political power after the 1972 coup that saw Oswaldo López Arellano take the presidency.

Here the development question took the form of trying to diversify the economic structure – to move away from dependency on bananas – and to exploit the hidden natural riches of the country. The myth of the rich but impoverished country continued to be mobilized, now in the form of modernization, or of “historical actualization,” as the 1972-75 National Development Program put it. The idea of attracting foreign capital continued to be crucial, but now it had to be combined with policies directed at improving the conditions of the rural and urban poor, and thus diffusing or deactivating popular unrest. The state was understood as both an enabler of capital accumulation – articulating the local with the global – and a buffer of class struggle. Nowhere was this more evident than in the countryside, as that same National Development Program saw the agrarian reform as the “fundamental task.”

The generalized impoverishment, increasing agrarian conflict, dispossession and discontent in the Honduran countryside in the 1960s and 1970s resulted from the deeper penetration and further extension of capitalist relations of production and the articulation of the national economy into the international markets. In regional terms, the country was still fragmented. Towards the south a process of land alienation and proletarianization of peasants, and agrarian capitalist control of most of the land and labor, accompanied the rise of the cotton, cattle and sugarcane sectors (Williams 1986). The result was an increasing number of clashes between peasants and cattlemen, particularly towards the end of the 1960s (Boyer 1982).

In the north, the banana enclave continued to serve as a migration attraction pole. But now – in the aftermath of the 1954 strike and various technological fixes – there were fewer jobs, a proliferation of peasant land occupations and a trickle of impoverished families moving towards lands in the northeast (Soluri 2009).

In the west, small farms persisted, producing staple crops and coffee, generally with low yields because of erosion and different forms of encroachment on communal and small owners’
lands. The west also saw increased immigration of Guatemalan and Salvadoran poor peasant and indigenous families (Anderson 1983; Metz 2010).

Finally, the state continued to view the eastern section of the country as “empty” but immensely rich lands. These “empty” lands, moreover, began to become the target of both the state, which saw them as a possible solution to the country’s agrarian conflicts and in need of “historical actualization,” and of an ever growing number of landless and land poor families who – informed as we will see by tales of the land’s extraordinary fertility and accessibility – envisioned the Department of Colón as an escape from their lives of poverty and suffering.

**Life before migration: kinship, land and labor**

Before describing the process of internal migration that led these families towards the Aguán, it is useful to characterize in very general terms the life conditions they encountered in their birth places. I focus mainly in the forms in which labor and land were procured and organized within households to secure subsistence. I privilege the perspective of kinship, because it is one of the places were the effects of the penetration of the capital relation is clearest. Nonetheless, this is a tricky approach, as kinship is one of the most neglected topics within the literature on Honduras (Central America really) of that period (1960s-70s). What I propose to do is to reconstruct certain general patterns, based on literature that does touch on the topic for the cases of the western (Chapman 1985; Roquas 2002) and southern (Boyer 1982) regions, from where most of the settler of the Aguán came.

It is important to point out, however, that my use of the notion of kinship is much more empirically than theoretically informed. This means that instead of aiming at a clear definition of what the Honduran kinship system is, I focus on how it operated in defining particularly

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36 If I was really pushed to provide a more formalized definition of the kinship network, I would say – following David Robichaux’s (2005) characterization of what he calls the “Mesoamerican kinship system” – that it is patrilineal, virilocal and with the last son inheriting all. However, in a situation similar to that of the Guatemalan Q’echi’, as described by Liza Grandia (2012:79): “[d]ecisions about residence tend to be
thick networks of social relationships between people of different ages and forms of filiation (Bourdieu 2008). In general terms, these networks comprise relations based on blood and marriage, but also friendship, place of origin and social institutions and rituals such as compadrazgo.\textsuperscript{37} Not all of these relationships have the same importance. The nuclear family is at the center of this kinship network, where the relationships between siblings are particularly crucial. Other forms of relationship – such as compadrazgo and friendship – spread out from there and become particularly important in situations of migration, where – as we will soon see – people followed on the footsteps of those who had travelled the same paths before (Arizpe 1980; Moctezuma Pérez 2006; Massey et al. 1999).

As described in the previous chapter, the more generalized penetration of capital in the Non-Banana Republic really took off in the post-World War II period. Before this, commodification and relations of labor exploitation existed, but were much more limited and circumscribed to the villages and the regional scale. More than wage labor, different forms of peonage and land rental prevailed in these regions, with the idiom of kinship as the main form of control.

In terms of production, most peasant households dedicated themselves mainly to self-provisioning through the production of milpa, the slash and burn cultivation of maize, beans and squash in the same plot, and husbandry of cows, chicken and pigs. This household practical – a choice between the two extended families based on the availability of land or the support they will offer... If neither family has land to offer the young couple, they may move somewhere else entirely. Even if they do live with one set of parents initially, a young couple will usually try to set up an independent household after the first child is born.”

\textsuperscript{37} In very general terms, compadrazgo refers to system that generates extra-domestic kin relationships through rituals such as the election of baptismal and wedding sponsors. This institution has been described as both enabling the expansion of kinship networks, as well as crystallizing and reproducing condescending relation of domination, as in the case of the haciendas, where the owner tended to be the baptism godfather of most of the worker’s children (Mintz and Wolf 1950).
production would be combined with the production of certain goods, such as dairy products or handicrafts, for sale in the larger towns. The income received was spent immediately on clothing, cooking utensils, tools or foodstuffs, such as salt and sugar. Thus, although commodification was present, it did not necessarily translate into monetization, as the amounts of money present were limited and most work – be it domestic or in the fields – remained unpaid.

Work was organized along gender lines. Agricultural labor, such as clearing and burning of the fields, weeding and harvesting, was mainly understood to being “men’s work.” However, in many cases, women would also take part in these activities during certain seasons, or in the cases of single mothers and widows. Domestic labor, such as hauling water, cooking and washing, milking cows and feeding livestock were – and are – seen as “women’s work.” This division of labor was also cross-generational, as children and young men and women were expected to work from a young age and to respect and obey their elders.

Also, particularly in the western communities of Lenca indigenous descent, collective work was common. People linked by kin ties would work together in each other’s fields, where these forms of collective labor were highly ritualized and deeply ingrained in the communities’ understanding of themselves and their environment and were crucial for the reproduction of the communal bonds (Chapman 1985).

Access to land was organized around both kinship and the ongoing expansion of the agricultural frontier, which was probably influenced by the idea that large amounts of free land were available. This connection becomes quite evident in the west, where land inheritance operated through what is known as the lazuro system. Here, according to Esther Roquas (2002), land would be passed undivided to the youngest son. In this way, the land was not fragmented and the idea was that elder brothers would have already left and created their own households by claiming free lands elsewhere, while the youngest one would remain home and take care of the parents. In the case of women, the idea was that they would be looked after by their husband
and they were thus excluded from inheritance. For women access to land has tended to always be indirect and through their husband. This inheritance system had more to do with what is usually known as “customary law” than actual written law, which did recognize women’s formal right to inheritance. Migration was thus deeply ingrained in the system of access to land and in the reproduction of peasant communities as a whole. I would argue that it is in part a legacy of the tension between labor and flight that existed since the colonial period (and which I described in the last chapter).

This situation began to change with the penetration of capitalist relations, particularly from the 1960s onwards. First, the new, more intensive use of land by cattle, cotton, sugar and coffee farmers spurred more aggressive processes of land dispossession and concentration by the elites. For example, Boyer (1982:94) mentions that in the 1960s “…peasants were removed [from their lands] in two ways: (1) by raising land rentals above peasants’ ability to pay and (2) through land enclosures wherein peasants were forcibly, sometimes violently, evicted from lands whose legal status was often in question.”

This situation began to place great stress on inheritance systems such as lazuro, as free land was no longer available for the older siblings to move out of their paternal homes. This eventually led to what Esther Roquas (2002) found in her fieldwork in Santa Bárbara Department in the mid-1990s, where the lazuro inheritance system was gradually transformed into a partible one in which land was fragmented and divided between sons and daughters, creating a whole new type of conflicts over property.

The 1960s witnessed a dual pattern of land fragmentation by peasant communities, with both partible inheritance and land concentration by elites. More and more of the household’s subsistence had to be procured through the market. As plots became smaller and the land less fertile – due to diminishing fallow periods and the extended used of slash and burn techniques – households had to look for more wage labor. According to Chapman, in the mid-1960s every household in the western hills was forced to collect one full-time wage income besides its own
milpa production. This meant that women had to work more in the fields and also that parents tried to keep their sons in the household longer, either to work the fields or to gather income as wage laborers, and that there was less time for collective work. This meant not only an expansion of commodification – production for sale – but more importantly the monetization of subsistence. Monetization seems to have had a corrosive effect on the practices of collective labor, as by the time Roquas (2002) was doing fieldwork in Santa Bárbara in the mid-1990s, there was little evidence of its presence.\(^{38}\) Importantly, this penetration of money in the process of provisioning meant a shift in the position of women and men in relation to each other and to the household. As production (the fields or wage labor) and reproduction (domestic labor) became separated, with the latter remaining unpaid, the position and work of women became increasingly devalued.\(^{39}\)

According to both Chapman and Boyer, one of the main responses to this situation was organization. Boyer, for example, describes how peasants in the south began to flock towards the National Peasant Federation as a way of protecting themselves from dispossession and of organizing land recuperations under the new agrarian legislation. Chapman describes how the creation of cooperatives – also within the new agrarian legal framework – allowed communities to access technical assistance and credit and thus to improve their conditions of production and procure some independence from wage labor. However, this route led necessarily towards conflicts with local landowners. The development of colonization projects, such as the BAP, was in part a response to these rising tensions.

\(^{38}\) She does mention that the possibility of pooling extra labor was still present through the channels of kinship. However, no mention is made of the rituals that used to accompany it and the labor had to be paid either in kind or in money. I found a similar situation in my fieldwork among people originally from the west.

\(^{39}\) See my discussion on the gendering of labor capture in the previous chapter. Also see Agarwal (1994), Mies (1986), Mackintosh (1989), and Crehan (1997) for similar discussions on the effects of monetization in other contexts.
The tendency towards migration remained, but with significant changes. First, because of growing tensions in the inheritance system, it became more common for the *lazuro* – younger son – to leave before his elder siblings, who might be engaged in wage labor or working in the family’s plot. As the local agrarian frontiers began to close, the patterns and routes of migration began to shift towards the north coast where, as tales had it, there were good wages to be earned in the banana plantations and plenty of free lands to be had.

**The march towards the West: agrarian conflict as trigger**

If we use the individual memories of the current dwellers of the Aguán Region as a window into the 1960s and 1970s and the dynamics that “triggered” their movement towards the east, what we find is a combination of elements deeply enmeshed in the political and economic conjuncture of the time, but that at the same time organized between the two options that I signaled at the end of the last section: organization and migration. These memories are of course informed by the current situation of those remembering, as well as by their particular life trajectories. However, when seen together, two main topics saturate migrants’ narratives about the “trigger” moment of their migration histories: dispossession and kinship.

In most cases, the decision to move away from their places of birth in the west had to do with the lack of access to land. Gonzalo was born 1959 in the midst of his family’s phased migration from La Paz department, in the southwest region of the country, right next to the border with El Salvador.

...my dad used to tell that they left there [La Paz in the late 1950s], right? Always looking, because those places were “burned” with very little money, I mean very few places to make money, there were no jobs. So they came searching to *La Costa*, that’s how they used to say over there, let’s go to *La Costa*.

We find a similar situation in the case of Marcelo, who was born and raised in Copán department, close to the border with Guatemala. Remembering his life in his hometown in the period prior to his relocation to the Aguán in 1974, he mentions that “the life in Copán is a hard
one. There is only the one harvest: beans, rice and maize. Past that harvest there is nothing left. That is why we decided to come here when the INA brought us. I haven’t moved ever since.”

Eugenia, and her husband Marino, both also from Copán, remember this period in a similar vein. When I asked them about what they used to do in their hometown before their period of phased migration and eventual arrival in the Aguán in the early 1970s, Eugenia responded: “Well in Copán the only work was as a day laborer.” “Over there only days that you work are eating days…” adds Marino. She continues, “And without lands, we didn’t have lands. He went renting land to work to make a little milpa. And I as a woman, only taking care of the kids, we had two kids... And then we migrated to [the department of] Atlántida…”

This lack of access to land was crisscrossed by different situations. In Gonzalo’s case, his father told him that one of the reasons for leaving La Paz was that the only land he could find was as sharecropper. In the case of Eugenia and Marino, he had to work as a jornalero (day laborer) since they did not have any land, while she remained home taking care of their children. This idea that they could only eat those days that he could get some work is indicative of the process of monetization of subsistence that was already well under way.

Alonso, who was born in 1973 in Atlántida, but whose parents came from Lempira, another department bordering El Salvador, presents the situation of dispossession vividly. When I asked him why his parents had decided to leave Lempira in the late 1960s, he responded: “Well, they tell me that they left because there were no possibilities in the department of Lempira and life was much harder. For example, they didn’t have a house, nor a piece of land, nothing. So they made the decision to leave their family in search of new horizons, because when two families come together it is to create new ideas, right?”

In a pattern similar to the one described by Grandia (2012) for the Guatemalan Q’echi’, more often than not, what I found is that the people migrating from the west during this period were young new families. Once they decided to make a home together – when a family is born, as Alonso phrased it – they found that the only option they had was to either stay with one of the
two families – usually the male’s – or to migrate in search of new lands. This was of course shaped by the kinship structure, in which the little land that the father had – for tenure has historically been a male entitlement in Honduras – was inherited by a single son or divided between all the sons and daughters, creating further fractioning. Also, as we will see, kinship ties structured the routes and dynamics of migration, as people tended to move where they had a family member or close friend.

Taking these testimonies together, we get a clearer picture of what many peasant families in the West were facing in the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, the dynamics of capital accumulation, but also the traditional forms of tenure, reinforced and accelerated the processes of bridling labor and permanent primitive accumulation that I analyzed in the previous chapter.

There was not a mechanical relation between these dynamics and the decision to migrate. The central effect of dispossession was to structure the field in which the social reproduction of these families occurred. By restructuring the tension between self-provisioning and market access (wage labor), it forced them to make decisions. These decisions, of course, were not entirely theirs to be made. However, there was always a choice. In this particular case, the options for the subaltern groups in the country’s west and south were threefold: to remain and endure labor capture; to remain but respond to dispossession through organization; or to migrate and respond to dispossession through flight.  

In the cases of those families I interviewed and that ended up in the Aguán, the choice between organizing and fleeing had very concrete effects. Two main patterns were evident. On the one hand, those families who decided to use flight as their main strategy of reproduction

Albert Hirschman (1978) argues in a similar vein regarding the alternative between “voice” and “exit” that the members of an organization have when confronting a conflict. The voice option refers to remaining in the organization and raising the voice to try to change that which he or she considers wrong or unacceptable. The exit option refers rather to leaving the organization to avoid the conflict. However, as I will show in this chapter and the next ones, there was nothing apolitical about fleeing labor and state capture.
began a long process of phased migration that, more often than not, led them to the hills surrounding the valley. On the other hand, those who organized locally to fight for land in the form of land occupations, tended to take part in the state-sponsored colonization program of the lowlands that began in 1970. In the next section I will focus on this second pattern and delve into the history of the Bajo Aguán Project and the experiences of those involved.

**The Bajo Aguán Project: the creation of peasant cooperatives as capture**

The 1954 general strike came to impact many different aspects of the political and economic life of the country. At the same time that it signaled the birth of the rural peasantry as an active political protagonist, it came to serve as a warning to the local elites and the transnational banana companies of what could happen if measures were not taken to curb discontent. In the case of the banana companies – as I discussed in the previous chapter – the solution was largely a technological fix: firing a significant amount of its labor force, introducing new technology and abandoning large amounts of land.

In the case of the state and the local elites, the solution could not be so simple. First of all, the 1954 strike and the 1964 coup against Ramón Villeda Morales, had exacerbated a conflict between an incipient industrial bourgeoisie, based mostly in San Pedro Sula, and the traditional seats of political and military power, located mainly around Tegucigalpa (Euraque 1996). While the first fraction was in favor of a redistribution of land and the creation of a settled peasantry that could bolster the domestic market, the second group, which related land tenure with political power, would have none of it and was willing to drown the Honduran countryside in blood before giving up its possessions and transforming the agrarian structure.

A quite lively description of this situation is in the autobiography of James “Guadalupe” Carney (1985:206), a U.S. Jesuit priest who arrived in Honduras in 1961 and was deeply involved with the peasant movement in the North Coast, up to his disappearance by the Honduran army in 1983:
In May of 1966, the crisis of the campesinos in the sector of Guanchias was greatly intensified; this was when the contract of the Tela Railroad Company for renting these lands from the Bograns ran out. As mentioned earlier, these lands had been abandoned by the Tela years ago and now were occupied by about twelve thousand persons, campesino families who lived and planted their milpas on these lands. Without even taking into consideration these poor families, the Bograns sold about half to the rich Colombian, Arcesio Echeverry, who had a deal with the Standard Fruit Company to plant bananas there. He immediately tried to throw the campesino families off the land. The Bogran Fortin brothers, Luis and Fausto, and the Bogran Paredes family wanted to extend their existing cattle ranches over all the rest of the land.

Extreme poverty and rampant dispossession, combined with an almost all out confrontation between organized peasantry, army and the private guards of the large landowners, created a very volatile situation. However, in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution and in the context of the Alliance for Progress, a less repressive solution to the conflict had to be found. Just as in the rest of Latin America, a timid, controlled and limited agrarian reform process was put in place (Kay 1998).41

The agrarian reform was an opportunity to stitch together various political and economic raw wounds and thus stabilize domination. First of all, it was a form of neutralizing class struggle in those places where it had further escalated, by improving the living conditions of the rural poor, and thus broadening the internal market, but without significantly altering the agrarian structure — a sort of passive revolution in the countryside, as discussed in the previous chapter. Second, Oswaldo López Arellano gave a speech on January 1, 1974, in which he mentioned that "the agrarian reform is oriented towards the incorporation of lands that currently remain unproductive and outside the national process of development, and substitute the system of large and small units by technically developed ones." Third, by rationalizing land use and distributing “idle” land to cash crop producing organized peasants, it could expand agricultural production for both domestic and foreign markets, thus creating a surplus that

41 However, it is important to point out that, outside of Cuba and Mexico, this was probably the most far reaching agrarian reform in Latin America up to that point.
could be used for industrialization. Fourth, it meant that peasant organizations could be regulated through law, brought in line and reshaped to the needs of capital accumulation — labor capture in a larger and more stable form. Finally, if all of these elements could be brought together in a harmonious way, the agrarian reform could be the centerpiece of a process of “historical actualization” in which the gap between supposed natural riches and economic poverty would finally be brought together under the banner of development and progress.

It is not surprising, then, that sponsored colonization, rather than land redistribution became the cornerstone of the Honduran agrarian reform. In general terms, colonization projects meant bringing land that the state deemed “empty” into the dynamics of capital accumulation without touching the agrarian structure, a requirement for the passive revolution approach to be viable.\textsuperscript{42} They were also a way of bringing important know-how and resources from abroad, as almost nobody – either from within or abroad – saw the country as having the minimal conditions for carrying out a meaningful agrarian reform program by itself (Castro 1994).

As early as 1960, before the famous Conference of Punta del Este in which the Alliance for Progress was officially launched, the Honduran government had requested support from the Organization of American States (OAS) for carrying out preliminary studies on designing an agrarian reform plan. The initial letter of intent sent by the Honduran government went beyond agrarian reform and proposed a set of broader reforms that together seemed to point towards a grand agrarian development program that included both agricultural and industrial development. Towards the end of 1960 the OAS sent a multidisciplinary group of specialists, which came to be known as Mission 105. Due to the lack of the necessary information, Mission

\textsuperscript{42} This sort of \textit{terra nullius} argument is neither new, nor exclusive to the Honduran case. It has been used in many different contexts and times to legitimize dispossession (see for example, Locke 1980; Tully 1982; Gordillo 2004; Milun 2011; Gidwani 2008a).
105 limited itself to proposing two colonization projects: one in the South and the other in the Aguán River basin in the northeast.

Regarding the Aguán, the initial objective of Mission 105 was to propose an integral development project that would include the whole river basin. However, because the government (and thus the Mission) lacked the necessary scientific information on the conditions (climatic, hydrological, morphological, among others) of the whole basin and because the country did not have the minimal necessary financial and human resources to develop the whole basin, it was decided that the project should focus only in one of its sections: the Bajo or Lower Aguán. The idea was that once this first part was completed it would be possible to include the middle and upper parts of the river basin. On March 4, 1964, the General Secretary of the OAS, Uruguayan José Mora, handed the Honduran government the document titled Proyecto Bajo Aguán (Lower Aguán Proyect; BAP). It included information related on the first two phases of a proposed general timetable. The report was presented by the Honduran Rigoberto Sandoval Corea, who was then working for the IDB, but who would later become the mastermind of the agrarian reform process.

The original BAP proposed by Mission 105, was very ambitious. It suggested creating all the necessary infrastructure and the financial and technical conditions so that “following an ordered plan, the river basin ... [could] be in full production in approximately 10 years” (OAS 1964:2). This was envisioned as a project that would inscribe civilization and development into a region that was rich in natural resources, but very close to “empty” and “idle.” Early in the document, for example, is the claim that,

The Bajo Aguán Colonization project consists of a series of measures for the development of one of the five zones in which the Aguán river’s Valley has been divided. These lands, most of which were very fertile, had been returned to the State by a banana company that exploited them for several years. However, due to the deterioration of the infrastructure, these lands are currently semi-abandoned and populated in part by occupants whose activities do not contribute to fulfilling the economic potential of the region. (OAS 1964:4)
On the next page, the document asserts that the Aguán “…possesses the [country’s] most abundant and practically unexploited natural resources” and that the BAP is an epic endeavor in which “the project will be the first step in what could be called the ‘the march towards the East’” (OAS 1964:5).

The main objectives of this march towards the East were to colonize around 70,000 hectares and “…to incorporate to the money economy and improve the living conditions of 6,059 peasant families…, reaching a level that will allow them to produce enough food to improve their diet, as well as producing surpluses for national and international markets” (OAS 1964:4–5). In terms of infrastructure, the region was portrayed as being almost “virgin” land, as the entire remaining banana company infrastructure was in very bad shape, but the report was optimistic that the situation could be improved in just three years.

In terms of production, the BAP had a straightforward objective, to bring the peasant families into the logic of the market in two main ways: on the one hand, promoting the production of export-oriented cash crops, such as oil palm, cacao and citrus trees. On the other hand, to provide financial and technical support to improve the productivity of staple food production – mainly maize and beans – to supply both the domestic and Central American markets. This was supposed to help the country and peasants in different ways. First, by increasing their cash income, it would improve the living standards of the relocated families. Second, by creating surpluses that could be sold, it would create national income that could be funneled into industrialization. Third, it would diversify the productive structure and thus reduce dependency on bananas and the economic vulnerability that this implied. Finally, it would allow the creation of economies of scale and improve productivity through the use of better technology.

Beneficiaries would be given individual farms. The size of these farms would depend on their location and would range from 10 to 16 hectares, depending on the fertility of the soils. Through the National Agrarian Institute (INA) and the state banking sector, they would receive
financial and technical support and the farms would be furnished with some basic improvements, such as irrigation ditches and water wells. Housing projects would also be developed to cover all of the beneficiaries. The construction formula was easy: the state would provide the needed materials and most of the construction labor would be provided by the beneficiaries themselves.

The project’s report argued that one of the reasons for the low levels of productivity in the country were the low educational and health standards. Improvement in these areas was seen as crucial for the success of the project and, besides improving housing conditions, clinics and schools would be constructed using a similar construction formula as the one for the housing projects.

The selection of the beneficiaries was not left to chance. Besides the selection criteria present in article 79 of the agrarian reform law – being Honduran, male or female head of household, at least 16 years old, owning no or very little land and having as an occupation agricultural labor –, the BAP presented a set of “specific characteristics, which define the individual and family group aptitude of the future beneficiaries” (p. 152). These characteristics included “working capacity” and “general conditions.” Regarding working capacity, “it will be measured through the point system proposed by the sociologist Arrigo Serpieri... In this system, points are accorded to the man-work unit, the consumption relation and the future consumption relation” (p. 153). It is worth noting that Serpire was undersecretary of the Ministry of Agriculture under Mussolini in 1923. In the case of general conditions, four elements were to be taken into account: conduct, habits, health and education.

As this quick overview suggests, the project proposed in the OAS report was not only quite ambitious, but also all very broad. It encompassed almost all the aspects of the future life of the beneficiaries, from what to produce to where they should live and what their homes should look like, to the type of attitudes they should have. All of these were to be under the control of the state in the form of the colonization authorities. The project drafted by the
Mission 105 imagined the BAP as an institutional hub that would supervise and through technical knowledge and power would create an island of development that could later be replicated in other parts of the country. Within this vision, peasant families would become efficient cash crop producers that would help the development of the country. Here, development was understood as both material and subjective, as what was assumed as peasant “nature” had to be transformed and cultivated for it to become compatible with development and progress.

Parallel to this technocratic imagination, we are also introduced in spurts and hiccups to the anxieties that the Honduran reality created in the hearts and minds of those who prepared the report. Nothing could be left to chance, because everything that was “traditionally” Honduran represented a menace to development. It is important to stress that under this vision, development was understood as the transformation of subsistence-oriented and traditional households into modern capitalist, market-oriented ventures under the tutelage of the state. In this way, peasant households would metamorphosize from burdens into catalysts of the national economy.43

The recipe for success was to fill an empty space that contained the natural potential of the nation, but that could be molded through inflows of foreign capital and technical knowhow into something different: a locus of capitalist development that could radiate outward to the rest of the country. An ever present obstacle, however, was the lack of the required human (labor) quality. For development to flourish out of the “virgin” lands of the Aguán, a new social subject had to be created, very Honduran in terms of nationalism and patriotic feeling, but utterly not-Honduran in terms of her or his cultural and labor practices. If land capture needed the cultivation of a particular type of laboring subject, the intention of the BAP was to move in that

43 For a detailed ethnographic study of how development projects are deployed in the ground, see Tanya Murray Li’s (2007) study on Indonesia’s “development” history.
direction, absorbing unruly peasants from different parts of the country and converting them into productive citizens, tied to the land and to the national economy through the market.

When paper encounters reality: from the Mission 105 to the actual BAP

As it often happens with development projects (see for example Mosse 2005; Li 2007; Ferguson 1990), significant differences existed between what Mission 105 presented, the goals with which it started and the results on the ground. First, the final $7.7 million agreement between the OAS and the Honduran government was signed on October 2, 1969. The total cost of the Project was estimated at $13.1 million, leaving the government to provide the other 41 percent. However, the project suffered significant delays due in part to the 1969 war with El Salvador, but also to the fact that there were no clear legal procedures regarding land tenure. Thus in practice, the project only kicked off at the end of 1971, 24 months later than initially planned. Also, the BAP got off to a slow start, and it only began to gain momentum with the signing of Decree No. 8 (December 26, 1972) and Law-Decree No. 170 (January 14, 1975), both mentioned above. Because of these delays, as well as the destruction caused by Hurricane Fifi (September, 1974), the budgetary disbursements were pushed back another twelve months until April 2, 1977. A final element that also influenced these delays was the decision in 1972 to change the original plan of individual farms towards a framework that favored peasant cooperatives.

The Aguán at the moment of arrival of the cooperatives

Before returning to the experience of the migrant families, it is important to describe how the region was before their arrival and to show just how “empty” it was. During the 1920s and 1930s the Aguán had been the home of the Truxillo Railroad Company, which cut down vast quantities of valuable hardwoods in order to plant thousands of hectares of bananas. The fact that in the early years it bought most of its bananas from local small producers speaks not only of the transformation of the landscape – from tropical forest to banana plantation – but also of some type of social organization, with groups of small producers and railway and plantation workers. By the 1940s the company abandoned many of the banana farms due to the spread of the
Panama disease – a plant fungus (Soluri 2009). In the postwar period, the companies had all but abandoned the Aguán, giving way to scattered settlements of ex-banana and railway workers, Garifuna communities, landless Salvadoran immigrants and local landowners – either former banana producers or cattle ranchers –, remaining largely outside the influence of the state (Casolo 2009). In terms of tenure, the region’s land was divided into farms ranging from 1 to 500 hectares, with a predominance of small farms (around 60 percent) (Castro 1994). However, according to the 1966 and 1974 censuses, 3.6 percent of the local population owned 87 percent of the lands (Macías 2001).

This description of the region contrasts with its characterization by Mission 105 as an almost empty space, with little and often abandoned infrastructure and poorly exploited land and other resources, supposedly largely outside of the market (both cattle and precious woods were reported as being extracted). In terms of the demography, according to the 1961 census, there were 30,020 people living in the zone, which represented a 50 percent increase in 10 years. Further, the region was attracting flows of relatively young families (only 5 percent of the population was 65 or older).

The migrants... proceed from various parts of the country, among others, from the banana producing zones, in which unemployment has increased due to the contraction of activities, particularly in the zones of Tela and Cortés; from the South coast and the West, which are zones of great demographic pressure. (OAS 1964:71)

Also, according to the 1952 census, 77 percent of the economically active population in the Aguán region was not under the wage relation, “...which indicates... the family character of the farms found currently in the Colonization zone...” (p. 75). Further, those family nuclei were relatively small (approximately 1.8 family members), which reinforced the idea of a young agrarian frontier region. The families lived under conditions of pervasive poverty that – according to the Mission 105 report – could be literally seen in their housing conditions:
The immediate family members inhabit, in general, a house made of *wattle and daub*, or in a hut made of palm leaves. Commonly, this house has one or two rooms and is inhabited by the children, the adults, the pigs and the poultry. Commonly, furniture is scarce and very rustic, and most houses do not have wells, potable water, or sanitation systems that would help eliminate the hazards of intestinal parasites and other digestive illnesses. (Mission 105: 76)

In broad terms, the approach of the state to the region can be divided into two moments. First, from 1971 to around 1975, the BAP got a weak start as the money from the IAB still had not rolled in and the military had not yet seized formal control of the state; this was a moment of slow advance. Second, from 1975 onwards, after the 1972 coup (see Chapter 1) and the passing of the agrarian law, the military state approached the colonization endeavor as if it were a war: with vertical control and a ruthless exercise of force that left little space for dissent. In 1977 the international funds for the BAP finally kicked in and then the actual plan of enrolling participants in different parts of the country began.

In the first period (1971-1975), the original Mission 105 text of the BAP not only mentioned the local population of the region, but included them as potential members of the future cooperatives. However, once the project began to pick up steam, it became harder and harder for these families not only to be included within the cooperatives, but also to hold on to the land that they had called their own just a few years before. From the perspective of the state, all of the land that was to be included in the BAP was state-owned and thus the vast majority of local dwellers were illegal occupants. However, according to the agrarian reform law, the state had to pay for any improvements – crops planted, wells, buildings, and so on – that they had made on the land.

Everyone I met who had been living in the Aguán prior to the arrival of the INA and the BAP remembered this period with bitterness, as they went from poor landowners to just poor. Three elements saturate their “memories of dispossession” (Hart 2006): first, that although they agreed with the idea of giving land to the poor, they were against how it had been done; second, that the state had lied to them, since they never actually received payment for the
improvements; third, the whole process was tilted in favor of the “outsiders,” as against the “locals.”

Luis is a school teacher who was born and raised close to the town of Tocoa in the middle of the Aguán Valley. When I asked him about how the town was before the cooperatives arrived, he responded with a bitter tone:

No, before the cooperatives, the town [of Tocoa] was hard working in agriculture and there was little education, very few schools. There was only one school here. So the people from all the aldeas [villages] came here and each independent peasant enjoyed having up to eight milk cows and there was no enclosed property in the hands of the poor. Only the rich had wire fences to keep their cattle, but for the poor, it was free space. And there was abundance of everything: maize, beans, rice, pork, cattle, milk, cream; everything in abundance. The daily wage was a Lempira [around $0.50 at that time]... It was, we could say, a more individual [independent] life style.

Luis’s narrative presents a quite complex picture. For him, the arrival of the cooperatives meant a significant break with the past. Before the cooperatives, the Aguán was a place of labor and agriculture, a world of abundance filled with many different crops. It was also a place on the fringes of the state – as signaled by the lack of access to education. Although there was little social differentiation, it was not an idyllic classless society, as there was differentiation between the “rich” – with their cattle and barbwire\(^44\) – and the poor – with their staple crops and open spaces. Finally, it was a space of individual life and labor and in general, it would seem, of a certain peace and calm in poverty.

“The process of intrigue began once the cooperatives came here,” Luis continued. As our conversation shifted to the period after the arrival of the cooperatives, he presented a description that seemed to mirror, but in opposition, all of the elements that he originally described:

The agrarian reform brought peasants from the South, from Intibucá; groups of many trucks would come in to the settlements with the military and evict the owners of the land. Then the peasant [that was living in the region before the BAP] began to emigrate, the sons of the peasants began to migrate to other places, looking for other life systems... So, we had a rivalry, because the cooperativista [cooperative member] could not see the independent peasant, because the latter resented that his patrimony had been taken away... It is then, after the agrarian reform with the settlements that the independent peasant began to look to the cerros [the hills]. Because they didn’t have any options, because they saw that everything was covered in palm and it was a labyrinth and major discords began, and there were a lot of deaths. After that, came the persecution by the large landowners, the cooperativistas and the large landowners. The individual peasant didn’t have any problems, he had settled in the cerros. But the large landowner did, because they were already there before the agrarian reform. And today, after the agrarian reform, large landowners still exist, and have bought the lands from the groups of peasants who have sold the land that the state gave them, and now they find themselves in a worse position than those peasants who were evicted at the beginning.

With the cooperatives came the dispossession of the local poor.45 In a sense, this dispossession was parallel and enmeshed with the arrival of the state in the region, in the form of the military and the trucks that brought in the peasant families from other parts of the country. Further, as the migrants from the rest of the country rolled in, the “independent peasant” and in particular his sons, had to migrate to other places, mainly towards the hills, reenacting the tension between cycles of dispossession and cycles of flight as a form of survival, as a way of being in the world. For Luis, the independent peasant was opposed to the cooperatives, their collective labor and the support they had from the state. With the

45 This narrative resonates strongly with the one presented by what we could call the enclosures approach to dispossession (see for example, De Angelis 2004; Grandia 2012; Blomley 2007). According to this approach, capital and primitive accumulation come to destroy the “commons”: land and other natural resources that are openly available for all (where “all” can be defined in different terms), under a set of rules and customs that differ from the idea of private property. However, in much of this literature there is a strong tendency to present the (supposedly) precapitalist moment – that of the commons – in highly idyllic terms. Further, since the idea of the commons is squarely rooted in history of the British transition towards capitalism, there is a danger of collapsing very dissimilar processes under one single notion. It is mainly for this last reason that I prefer to think about how labor capture – the interconnections between primitive accumulation and labor bridling – takes place in particular settings.
cooperatives the intrigues began and the variety of crops gave way to the monoculture of palm oil and its labyrinthine, monotonous landscape. The only seemingly existing constant is that of the big landowner, of the valley’s rich.

It should then come as no surprise that, during the first year of the Project, the message “INA fuera del Aguán” (INA leave the Aguán) could be found scribbled all over walls in Tocoa, or that trucks and other machinery were vandalized. This resistance to the agrarian reform and the INA was quite generalized in the region and was not limited to poor peasants such as Luis’s parents. In his book on the BAP, Angel Castro (1994:55) quotes the following testimony from one of the members of the earlier cooperatives regarding their arrival in the region.

The agrarian reform was done through sheer pressure by peasants...The land was yet to be distributed and the peasants had to take it by force while rallied on by the INA [promoters]. The risk of dying was high as the army was on the side of the large landowners, they would come to evict us... I remember how my other compañeros and I watched with impotence how members of the Army made a functionary of the INA eat grass and bind him with barbwire in the aldea of Tosca. Days later the functionary’s dead body appeared. (p. 55)

As we can see, before López Arellano came to power and placed the Agrarian Reform at the top of the government’s agenda, the situation in the Aguán was particularly hostile to the BAP. As much of the literature on agrarian reform points out, the speed and extension of the reform is defined by the particular combination between peasant pressure from below and a sympathetic government from above (see for example Kay 1998; Moyo 2002; Courville, Patel, and Rosset 2006; Chonchol 1967). Also, it would seem to confirm political scientist Michael Albertus’s (2010) claim that in Latin America autocratic governments have an easier time implementing significant redistributive reforms than democratic ones. According to Albertus, this has to do with the fact that autocratic regimes do not need to worry about pleasing or appeasing antagonistic social groups, as their legitimacy comes more from the deployment of force than the creation of electorally mediated consents. For the Honduran case, I would argue that it also had to do with the dynamics of passive revolution themselves. Marx (1992) mentions
in Volume 1 of *Capital* that the coercive law of competition creates a tension between the interests of the individual capitalist – maximize profit now – with the collective class interests of the bourgeoisie – reproduction of the conditions of accumulation for the future – and that it was the role of the state to step in and regulate the situation.\(^\text{46}\) It seems to me that something similar was operating here. For the landowning elite, the idea of promoting land redistribution was unthinkable, but for the political regime some sort of controlled access to land was the necessary condition for the forms of domination to remain intact. At the end, this contradiction came to be mediated and institutionalized through and in the form of the state.

Returning to the Aguán, it is worth pointing out that certain last names, belonging to some of the most prominent local landowners present before the BAP, such as Nájera, Bascha and Alemán, continuously appeared, not only in the narratives of the people that I spoke to, but also in local landmarks, such as schools that were named after members of these families. They also appeared to get the better end of the process of land dispossession that the BAP entailed, as in every case they either managed to keep their lands or to be relocated to other places. Don José, for example, a member of La Norteña Cooperative, to whose history we will turn shortly, remembers how his dad had a 30 hectare farm on the hillsides close to Tocoa. He was threatened by the functionaries of INA that he either join a cooperative or lose his land. He opted for the former, but later learned that that his farm had been given to the Nájera family in return for a piece of land that they had lost in the valley’s lowlands. These sorts of negotiations between local elites and government point to the fact that capital accumulation – and hegemony for that matter – is never promoted or done in a vacuum. The BAP was to be installed in a place

\(^{46}\) In chapter 10, Marx shows how the pressure from the working classes to improve their conditions led to the promulgation of a set of policies oriented at regulating their working conditions. Marx points to the irony that at the same time that these policies improved somewhat their working conditions, they were also beneficial for the industrial bourgeoisie in the long run, as they curved the literal destruction of labor power in the workshop, and thus secured the conditions of capital accumulation in the future.
that — far from “empty” — was filled with political dynamics and tensions and particular relations of domination which — as Luis so eloquently describes — articulated the local cattle ranching elite with the poor peasantry that also inhabited the region. Thus, more than simply imposing its will upon the region, the state had to negotiate with the dominant groups present locally, to lubricate the sociopolitical landscape and allow the agrarian reform to gain traction on the ground.

Father Carney (1985), whose autobiography we already referred to in this chapter, also mentions how the local landowners were given a free hand to protect their lands by any means necessary and to encroach on those of poor peasants inhabiting the valley. There were also internal differentiations, as the levels of violence exercised by the landowners were greater on the left bank of the Aguán River than on the right bank, where the efforts of the BAP were mainly concentrated.

This differentiation between the left and right banks has a long history. Already during the period of the banana plantations, there was a clear concentration of both infrastructure and production in the river’s right bank, which also affected population patterns once the companies left, as most people concentrated around the town of Tocoa. This situation also came to inform the design and implementation of the BAP, as the right bank was seen as having better conditions for the colonization project, due to its better infrastructure and year round accessibility. In this way, the first cooperatives created in the region – Salamá in 1971, quickly followed by La Confianza, Central Aguán, La Zamora and La San Isidro – were all located on the right bank and relatively close to Tocoa.

Another point to take into account is the decision that the “locals” – those settled in the Aguán before the BAP – had to make about whether or not to join the cooperatives. This was always a decision fraught with tensions. The testimonies of José and Luis present a notable counterpoint in this regard. In both cases, the arrival of the “foreign colonists” was experienced and remembered as a moment of dispossession in which the “local” poor had gotten the worst
end of the deal, while the “local” rich had managed to maintain their position. In the case of Luis’s family and many others, they had to leave their lands and migrate towards the hills, or move into Tocoa. There, they would have work in the incipient service sector – as in the case of Luis who became a teacher. The other available option, was to find work as day laborers in the cooperatives – which many times were located in the same place where they had formerly lived – or for the local rich (Castro 1994).

In the case of José’s family, as well as other families, his father was given the choice of either joining the cooperative or leaving the region. His dad decided to stay, but this was done in a more communitarian context. He remembers the period before to the 1970s and the arrival of the cooperatives as a period in which the landscape was dominated by guamil (thick bush) and as a place where “there was no suffering” and, although there was a clear differentiation between the rich and poor, there were no conflicts between them. However, with the 1970s the INA and the state came to expropriate the lands due to their condition as “national” land. There was not much peasant organization to speak of in the region, but with the BAP came the arrival of different national organizations, such as National Association of Honduran Peasants (ANACH) or the state-sponsored Honduran Federation of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives (FECORAH). José and his family lived in the aldea of San Isidro, close to Tocoa, which eventually absorbed it and turned it into a neighborhood. Here, most families worked the land and grew mainly staple crops for self-provisioning; that, as we have seen, was the great enemy of the BAP and its development perspective. Around 1973, seeing the process of dispossession that was affecting most of the region, the people from San Isidro began organizing their own cooperative, because “it was not fair that the people of San Isidro should be left without access to land.” In this case we see the reenactment of the flight versus capture dilemma: leave the lands and venture into the hills (flight), or organize, become a cooperative and become absorbed by the BAP (capture).

By 1976, José’s father had become a beneficiary of the agrarian reform program, as member of La Norteña cooperative. These were not the only cooperatives that had a strong
component of “local” members. Others were the Salamá, la Confianza, Bajo Aguán and Zamora cooperatives. All of them had been based in aldeas with a deeper history, closer kinship links and were more accessible, as they were all located on the right bank. We will return to their history briefly, but before that, I will turn to the experience of those who were brought in from outside the region and also examine some additional elements related to the creation of the cooperatives.

Arriving in the Aguán

If at the level of the state, the BAP had started with the negotiations with the OAS and the promise of development, for many of the families from different parts of the country, the BAP began as a promise of access to land and a better life. Everyone that I spoke to remembered how the INA or the national peasant organizations told them that they would be given good, ready and fertile lands once they arrived in the Aguán, that their lives would now be easy. Nothing could have been further from the truth. As they left their hometowns and communities, they remember how they thought that with this journey their former problems would be left behind and their struggles would have paid off. Marcelo remembers well that the tough life that they had back in Copán

... forced us into organizing an association of the ANACH. There, we would each contributed daily six Lempiras, when the daily wage was two Lempiras. We got organized; we made a big sacrifice, to manage to have something left to eat... We applied for the land [that they were occupying], and after two years of waiting, the state tells us that they are going to sell us the land. An INA promoter came and told us that we had to make a contract regarding the land. However, it happened that there were a lot of precious woods in the land: cedar, mahogany ... So he [INA promoter] comes back and tells us: “look, we can’t give you this land, but we have some other land ready, tecnified land in Colón. There – he told us – we are going to give each associate 10 hectares of land to work individually.” That made us happy, as we didn’t have anywhere to work... But the problems began when we got here...

In his case, as in many that I encountered, the process of being “selected” – in a way very different way from what the Mission 105 document proposed – was found in the intersection between organization and conflict. They first organized themselves as members of a national
peasant organization – in this case ANACH – as they continued their struggle for land.47 Marcelo does not mention it, but it is possible that at this moment they were occupying the land as a way of pressuring the state towards giving it to them under the new agrarian law.48 At that moment the state functionaries appear and inform them first that they could buy the land, but later that they cannot give them the land because of the valuable hardwood trees there. Then an alternative was offered: they can be moved to the Aguán, were they will have what at the moment appeared to him as “vast” lands: 10 hectares per family, which of course suggests how fragmented lands in the west were in this period.

This reading of the agrarian reform and particularly of the BAP as a form of deactivation of agrarian conflicts makes sense. However, it is important to add that before 1977 the role of the state – in the form of the INA – was of enabling the migration towards the region, but the actual organizing and logistics of the trip were the responsibility of the peasant organizations (Castro 1994).

Marcelo remembers that once they were ready, ANACH hired a convoy of trucks to take them and all of the possessions that they could carry from their hometown in Copán to the Aguán. They had to go with an armed escort, since the local population was against their arrival. Once there, their original group of families was divided up and added to diverse cooperatives. When I asked Marcelo about how he remembers the place when he first arrived. He mentions emphatically: “These really dense forests! There were big trees, really thick bush.”

Shortly after Marcelo’s arrival on the left bank of the Aguán, in September, 1974, Hurricane Fifi struck. In the aftermath of the disaster, the types of families that were selected into the BAP seems to have expanded to include those from communities affected by the

47 A similar situation is described by Boyer (1982) for the south of the country.

48 Marcelo does not remember the exact moment when this happened. However, he arrived in the Aguán in 1974, so we could speculate that it happened at the beginning of the 1970s.
hurricane. Further, the state moved from simple enabler to actual promoter of the migrations. By 1977, with the inflow of OAS funds, the INA had opened offices in Choluteca (south), Comayagua (center) and Santa Rosa de Copán (west), which began to select families in regard to three criteria: land with little agriculture potential, concentration of agricultural population and lack of agrarian reform lands (Castro 1994). The idea was not to create new cooperatives, but to fill the already existing ones.

We find an example of this in the lives of Eugenia and Marino. They had left Copán in the late 1960s in search of a better life in the north coast. After their relocation to the municipality of Esparta in the department of Atlántida, they built a champita (small hut made of palm leaves and mud-covered walls) close to a river. With Fifi this river overflowed and destroyed their champita, leaving them with their “arms crossed,” – without work – as Marino would phrase it. In the aftermath of the hurricane, the peasant organizations began the process of organizing the affected families. Just as in the case of Marcelo, this process was done by ANACH. They remember how they began the process of organizing and forming groups and were told that once they got to the Aguán, everything would be different and they would have land to work and food to eat, that everything was pretty much ready. Then, around five trucks arrived to take them to the Aguán. Eugenia remembers putting not only her clothes and other meager possessions, but also a few chickens that she had. However, once they got to the Aguán their difficulties continued:

When we got here, we arrived with the two girls, we came to eat rotten maize, they gave us rotten fish and wet oatmeal, damp, and that had a bad smell, but we had to eat it because there was nothing else... Because of him [Ramiro], for the land is that we came. Then we started to see that there was no drinking water and it was then that I felt uncomfortable, ‘Damn! Let’s better go away from here,’ I told them. ‘‘No, he responded, ‘we already went and saw the lands, they are really good lands and we are going to make milpa.’ And my mom would also support me. She used to tell me, ‘‘no, daughter, to better yourself, you have to suffer, there is no water here, but we will find a way.’ We made champas with sheet metal, there we cooked and we took out water with plastic containers from some really deep wells. And most of the people were fighting over the little water that there was. And if we didn’t cover the well, the next day that we could come, we
would find frogs and rotten logs, everything would fall there, and we would pull out the container with water and frogs would be in there. So we would throw them away and drink the water. It was awful! I don’t even want to remember.

Coming from very difficult contexts, framed by dynamics of dispossession and “natural” disasters, these impoverished families arrived in the Aguán with the promise that they would receive plenty of good land and that their lives would immediately improve. However, as we can see from these testimonies, these promises remained just that, promises, never to actually be realized. For Eugenia, her bitterness was very much grounded in her immediate domestic conditions; procuring subsistence became an almost nightmarish task. In the case of Ramiro, who according to Eugenia was behind the idea of moving to the Aguán, the trip was motivated by the hope of accessing land and with it, a better future.

I tended to find this split in temporality in many of my interviews. For women, the trip is usually remembered in terms of the everyday difficulties of procuring basic subsistence and very much grounded in their immediate conditions. For men, the process is remembered rather from the perspective of the hopes they had of moving away from poverty, becoming landowners and being able to work for themselves. Both of these temporalities inhabit, of course, a present of ubiquitous poverty, but while provisioning and subsistence tend to be the standpoint from which women judge that past, for men the more salient elements are the ideas of being able to work and of being forever poor.

In general, the memories of most of the people that I spoke to about this period, both “locals” and “outsiders,” were saturated by three overarching elements: first of all, nature and their struggles against it; second, the new dynamics that coming together and working with other people brought; and third, the tensions between producing milpa and the introduction of palm oil as a cash crop. I will turn to these topics in the next section.

**The production of the Bajo Aguán: nature, capital and a new laboring subject**

Nature as an external element (Smith 2008) is a pervasive theme in the memories of those who lived and arrived in the Aguán during the 1960s and 1970s. Words such as guaimil or jungle are
found often in their narratives. Eugenia and Marino remembered the place where they arrived as wild and socially empty: “There was nothing, only monte [high wild grass]...” she tells me “there were only mountains and a part guamil down below.” “Most of it was guaimil, other than that, there was nothing at all,” Marino adds.

In all of the different narratives, nature appears as something both external and opposite – as something initially operating against them –, but also as something exotic and potentially nourishing. Mosquito and snake bites, bad water, fevers and other tropical diseases were just some of the dangers that they had to face. Further, this was a strange nature, one that contrasted with the types of climate, animals and plants that they were used to in their hometowns in the west. However, at the same time, this nature provided them with new sources of nourishment through hunting and fishing. For example, Eugenia remembers this period as one of suffering, but also as one in which she had to turn collecting to feed her family: “there were a lot of tomatoes. When we couldn’t find anything to eat, we would go and cut them down, and roast them in the griddle, and that is how we fed the girls, it was terrible, terrible...”

At the same time, it was also in working with and against nature that they began to transform the region and create a home. Initially this was done by transforming the jungle into milpa through their labor. We return to Eugenia: “when I saw the lot, it felt like my life had changed. We now ate good maize, I would take care of a chicken, now she would lay an egg, we were on our way, it changed, it made a difference...”

Initially this production of nature – of turning this alien and hostile environment into home – was deeply intertwined or articulated with the idea of making milpa to sustain themselves and their families. This was a very deeply ingrained element in both the migrant families coming from the west and those that were already living in the region before the 1970s. These crops were seen as a form of safety; making sure that their families would not go hungry, or in cases such as that of Eugenia and Marino, that they would not go hungry again. It should come as no surprise then that in most cases, all the ones that I learned about at least, the first
thing that the members of the cooperatives did, was to clear the forest and make their *milpas*. For example, José remembers that one of the first things that they did in La Nortena cooperative was preparing and planting 100 hectares of maize. With support from the state bank, they also bought trucks to improve their productivity.

Although they were producing the same crops that they had grown most of their lives, the productive process was different. In their hometowns peasant households were used to producing in small individual plots, oriented mainly towards their self-provisioning. Now the logic was different. In most cases, the land in the cooperatives was split between individual plots for each family and other ones to work collectively. Certain days of the week they would work on their individual plots and certain days they had to work collectively. Further, a portion of the collective production had to be for the market, as the debt payments had to be kept up. In this way a separation between production and household reproduction began. To be a member of a cooperative one had to work in the fields; thus, membership was dominantly masculine. Women had an indirect membership and their activities were limited to participating in the “housewife clubs” that were organized by the INA promoters (Ooijens et al. 1990). Their unpaid domestic labor was not seen as part of the productive endeavor of the cooperative.

However, the fact that each household had access to an individual plot, in which the family might or might not be residing, meant that women could work on the side, raising minor livestock and some other crops. Livestock raising was heavily controlled and families could only buy larger species such as cows with the permission of the board of directors of the cooperative. As we will see, this tenuous foothold that women may have had on the land, and thus the household’s subsistence pattern, would begin to change, as the general strategy of the BAP begin to shift towards more profitable cash crops. In general, the introduction of these new forms of production and labor organization also meant a process of “agricultural intensification,” which – according to Michael Watts and Judith Carney (1991:652) – “...is about getting people to work
harder, a process that is social and gendered (getting some people to work harder than others) and that is typically coercive and conflictual.”

Starting with the report written by the OAS to the letter of intentions signed between this organization and the Honduran government, cash crops, and particularly oil palms and citrus trees, figured importantly in the plan. However, once the actual cooperatives began to work, there was great reluctance by the members to make the shift. This was due mainly to the lack of knowledge that the peasant families had regarding the new crops. For example, Marino remembers vividly the first time he saw an African palm in the Aguán. He told me that initially people thought that the palm’s fruit could be eaten directly.

However, in September 1974, when Hurricane Fifi crashed into the northern coast of Honduras, this situation began to change. Fifi has a central place in the testimonies of most of the people with whom I spoke. As we already saw, it was due to Fifi that Eugenia and Marino had to continue their journey, after their home was taken by a rising river. In Marcelo’s case the memory of Fifi has an even more conspicuous presence. “We came here on June 18, 1974. We wanted to work. The problem was that just as we were beginning, we get hit by Hurricane Fifi. That was unfortunate… During that season, my mom was a bit sick, and in that one [Fifi] she died.”

Besides the passing away of his mom, Fifi also made great alterations to the landscape: “This used to be a wild forest! However, Hurricane Fifi cleared it up, the woods were left sparse. After that a wild fire started by the Honduras Aguán [village] and burnt all this side [Aguán river’s left bank]. It finished off the deer, tepezcuintle [lowland paca], the entire zone was left clean since then.”

According to the different testimonies, after Fifi came three days of floods and hard winds that felled most of the trees in the hills. Later, no one knows if intentionally or not, there were great fires that devoured the trees and forest. At the same time, this destruction opened the door for the penetration and consolidation of cash crops such as oil palms and citrus trees in the
region. According to different reports on the BAP, the planting of the palms began as early as 1971. However, for almost everyone that I spoke with, the introduction of this crop was related to Fifi. Not only did the hurricane help topple most of the forest cover – a requirement for planting the palms –, but it also put the cooperatives’ future and production plans in the hands of the INA.

As we can recall from José’s testimony regarding the beginning period of La Norteña cooperative, they had received loans from the national banking system to finance their production and buy machinery, it was to be expected that all the other cooperatives had done something similar. Further, it is important to point out that the land was not given away for free to the cooperatives and they still had to pay for it through monthly installments. Thus, after Fifi the cooperatives were left in very bad shape: impoverished, with their production destroyed and deeply indebted. The INA promoters “recommended” that they shift towards more valuable cash crops as the only way in which they could continue accessing loans and paying their debts. The cooperatives did not have much choice but to oblige. It is safe to say that while the introduction of these crops came hand in hand with the beginning of the BAP, it was after Fifi that their widespread production was consolidated.

I will delve more in depth into the introduction of the palm oil industry in Honduras in the next chapter. For now it should suffice to mention that the move towards these cash crops had a clear transnational component. From the 1950s onwards the research unit of the Standard Fruit Company in Tela had been exploring alternatives to banana in response to the spread of the Panama disease. Oil palm was one of the crops that was particularly analyzed by the company. It is hard to connect directly the documentation from the Standard’s research department with the decision by the OAS to finance the BAP project in Honduras and a very similar project in the south of Costa Rica (Clare Rhoades 2011). However, there was a clear differentiation regarding the financing sources of the different projects of the BAP. In the case of the palm oil industry, the extension and promotion was financed directly by the OAS and
deployed by the INA. It is hard to come by reliable data in terms of how much money was spent on the different crops, but according to information from 1980, over $9 million had been spent in the cultivation of over 9,000 hectares (around a fifth of all the land distributed) divided in 54 cooperatives (Reyes 1980:69). In comparison, no data is to be found regarding staple crops. From what I have been able to gather either indirectly from reports or from my interviews, what little credit was given for staple crops came from the Honduran state’s meager resources. This support was so limited and deficient that many cooperatives preferred to avoid credit altogether or to look for ways of shifting production towards oil palms.

What we can see here is the agrarian reform cooperatives operating as a form of contract farming, in which the autonomous peasant enterprises “...survive in outward form only. They are formally integrated with, and subordinated to, various circuits of capital and the much-vaunted independent grower is little more than a propertied labourer, a hired hand on his or her own land” (Watts 1992:92).

This situation – the promotion of the crop from above, lack of control over what to produce and the scant knowledge of it from below – had as one main effect a very low level of adoption and initial appropriation of the crop by cooperative members. For example, José remembers that, although the crop was supposed to be “theirs” as it was planted in “their” lands, most members would talk about them as “las palmas son del BID” [the palm trees are the property of the IADB]. Further, when speaking to various members of the cooperatives, they refer to themselves and the process of planting the palm trees in terms of the low wages that they earned, the hard conditions and how little profit they saw from the process. For example, Eugenia reflects on the process of planting the palm trees:

They planted by pure pressure. Now you see how much the businessmen value the palm. It is exaggerated how much they pay for a planted tree. But now, for how much did they [the cooperatives] sell it? Imagine that they didn’t value it because the planting was given away, they didn’t get paid for the planting. Making the hole, I don’t know how it is called, all that process before production, they didn’t get paid. We had to figure out how we ate maize, we sold maize to buy
salt, sugar, and soap; but from the palm they didn’t receive money. So, we had to sell the eggs that the chicken laid to buy sugar, because it didn’t leave anything until the production began [oil palms trees take at least two years to begin production]. But then came the bigger problem, they got paid very little. I used to tell him ‘damn! Didn’t they used to say that once the palms started to produce, things were going to change?’

Also, the planting of the palm trees created internal tensions within the cooperatives, particularly around the production of staple crops. During the first years, as the palm trees began to grow, it was possible to plant other crops. However, after two to four years this becomes impossible. Marcelo remembers that...

...when we finished clearing the land, came that issue of the promotion of planting the palm. We took out a loan and with trucks they finished clearing all of the land and we planted the palm, and between we planted maize. We always lived from eating maize, beans and rice, until the palm began covering the lanes and we left it there. Later, we began to cultivate on other areas.

There were also clear gender differences regarding the experience of arrival and the spread of oil palms. Most women remember rather the impact that this process had on the nourishment and living conditions of their families. For example, Eugenia recalls the moment when the expansion of the area in oil palm began to be to the detriment of staple crops.

“When the palm project arrived, they ran over the maize with bulldozers, without harvesting it. No, there was a lot of brain weakness. I would say ‘No! Women, see how they are destroying those milpas. Why are they destroying those milpas? Why didn´t they harvest them?’ ‘No’ – the men would answer – ‘this project [the palm] must be, it must be now.’” Marino jumps in and adds “there where they ran over the milpas, they toppled everything. Afterwards in the project, 300 hectares of palm were planted. Then a time passed, around three years, for that to begin harvesting. We saw that the product that we took out of the palm was very cheap.”

In general, these elements – lack of appropriation of the process, low wages and lack of control over what to produce – will be at the center of many expert explanations regarding the selling of the cooperatives in the 1990s; however, we are getting ahead of ourselves, as I will return to this topic in the next chapter.
A final element has to do with the tensions that arose from the move from individual or independent to collective labor. In the case of those families that came from the west, as well of those already located in the valley, being organized in a cooperative and having to work collectively was not easy. As we saw in Luis’s testimony, both forms of organization were seen as oppositional and related to different social relations. In general, this move was experienced as the imposition of an external discipline that they were not used to. In the cooperative, they were told what to produce, when to work and what could be done or not. For example, in the first years of the cooperatives, although many families experienced high levels of poverty, the members could not work as day laborers outside of the cooperative. Eugenia remembers this situation vividly:

And he couldn´t go and work in another place, although there was work in Guanchias [an older cooperative]. Those who went to work there had problems, because they couldn´t work in another place other than the cooperative. He obeyed, he didn´t go, but others would sneak out and go make their pesos over there, but sneaking around so that the board of directors didn´t find out, because if they got caught, they were sanctioned. The problem was that Guanchias would pay them five Lempiras per day, while there [in the cooperative] they only made two Lempiras.

As we will see further ahead in this chapter, these forms of discipline were too much for many of the families – particularly for the men from the west – who decided to abandon the cooperatives and either stay in the valley as day laborers or migrate to other parts of the valley, often encountering and mixing with those informal flows that headed to the hills. Before turning to the history of those families that migrated to the Aguán outside the INA sponsored cooperatives model, we will describe the landscape of the Bajo Aguán towards the end of the 1970s and beginnings of the 1980s.

**From virgin to productive lands, from guamil to oil palms**

By the late 1970s and early 1980s the landscape of the Aguán valley had been radically transformed. The 1950s and 1960s were marked by an escalation in the number and fierceness
of agrarian conflicts in most of the country. This made the Aguán an attractive target for both landless peasants and ex-banana workers who started to inch slowly towards the region.

With the military’s deployment of the BAP, the 1970s saw yet another profound transformation of the valley’s landscape. Abandoned infrastructure was resuscitated and families were brought from other parts of the country to bring down the *guaimil* – the secondary forest that grew on top of the banana farms. They planted staple crops first and citrus trees, but later particularly oil palms. The weight of this transformation was carried mainly by the impoverished immigrant peasant who thought that in the Aguán their lives would improve dramatically and quickly. Reality was different from expectation and their struggles against poverty and dispossession continued, but in a different setting and under different conditions. For the men, joining the cooperatives meant adapting to the “time-discipline” (Thompson 1967) of collective labor, something that was never simple and that they resented as limiting their liberty. Further, they had little control over what was being produced and their relationship with their (supposedly) own land was in the form of a wage that barely covered their needs. For women, this situation meant looking for alternative ways to secure their family’s nourishment; from collecting to different forms of husbandry (pigs, chickens), they tried to create other sources of food or cash. However, as time went by and the palm oil industry extended across the land, these possibilities of diversifying provisioning became ever more complicated. It would seem that Carney and Watts (1991:672) are right, when they mention that altering “…property rights, narrowly defined as control over things, is simultaneously to transform social relations and reconstruct household production relations.”

If we were to look at an aerial picture of the Aguán in this period, we would probably see a few paved roads and more dirt roads crisscrossing palm oil and citrus plantations and also connecting a bunch of small villages and three larger towns (Tocoa, Trujillo and Sonaguera). We would see that there was a clear contrast between the river banks, with both population and infrastructure tending to concentrate on the right one. Also, as we got closer to the hills, we
would notice that the plantations start to give way to the production of staple crops – although *milpas* can be seen scattered all over the valley – and that the bush grows thicker.

So far we have looked at the Aguán from the optic of the valley – the lowlands closer to the river margins where the BPA was centered. However, this is not all the story and to better understand the region today, we must backtrack and follow the histories of those families that also migrated to the Aguán region during this period, but outside of the state-sponsored program and thus outside of the purview of the state and official history.

*The long way into the Aguán*

For many families the journey towards the Aguán was anything but straightforward. For those who remained outside of the peasant organization schemes that granted initial access to the agrarian reform cooperatives, getting to the Aguán tended to be the result of a long process of phased migration which often included whole families who, through a process of scattering and reunification, created complex migration routes. These routes tended to be organized mainly around three structuring elements: first, kinship – as the decision of where to move was usually influenced by the location of family members who offered support –; second, access to land – as in most cases these were families headed by males with a strong sense of independence and individual self-worth that made them leery of working in the banana plantations, the priority of the journey was always accessing land –; and nature – as many times the rhythms of the journey were punctuated by natural disasters such as hurricanes or floods.

Probably two of the more paradigmatic stories I heard regarding this long and bumpy road were those of Gonzalo and Emilio. Gonzalo’s parents had migrated away from their hometowns in the western department of La Paz and he was born in 1959 in Santa Rita, in the department of Yoro. He remembers that when he was a kid, his dad had managed to buy some land and although there were times of poverty, his dad was able to hire day laborers to help him on the farm. When he was about twelve, however, his dad decided that the family needed to relocate to the department of Colón. When I asked Gonzalo why, he responded “you could say
that we were doing well over there, but the fame of Colón was too great, they had given it a lot of fame. And he [his dad] made the decision and said: ‘I am going to Colón’ and went to visit by himself.

He came back to Yoro very happy, because in Masicales, a town on the left bank of the Aguán river, people told him that if he planted 10 manzanas of milpa – around 7.5 hectares – he would not know what to do with so much corn. His father was used to planting 19 manzanas in Yoro, so his response to this was that ‘I want to try and see if I am capable of harvesting 10 manzanas.’ So he managed to get some land there in Masicales, he found 11 manzanas, and the people would laugh at him [for wanting to grow so much corn].

This supposedly ultra-fertile land made the Aguán an attractive beacon for land poor and landless families, particularly those coming from zones with poor soils. In Gonzalo’s case, it meant an improvement over the conditions of fertility that he had in Yoro. This fertility not only had to do with the qualities of the soil, but also with the type of slash and burn migratory agriculture practiced by many peasant families. This form of production involved a cycle in which the family would move into a forested area, cut down the trees and burn the high grass, and then plant milpa. Usually, this would lead to severe land erosion, so the yields would decrease significantly each year, making it viable for two years or so; then the family would migrate and start again (Williams 1986). This dynamic by itself already created a pattern of intense mobility and, as I indicated earlier, it articulated even with inheritance patterns. However, it was also connected to forms of social hierarchy and processes of dispossession.

Many times, the only land that these families could access was already owned by a larger landowner, who would allow them to work in his land for one or two harvests in exchange for clearing the land – a step needed for cattle ranching –, and one or another form of rent 49. The Aguán – where the land was highly fertile and easy to obtain – was seen not only as a form of continuing this cycle, but as a way of breaking away from it and potentially prospering. As we can see from the tone in which Gonzalo refers to the process, this outcome was not necessarily

49 Hall et al. (2011) describe a similar geographical pattern in Southeast Asia.
assured. The decision to move to the Aguán was experienced instead as a process of impoverishment and dispossession: “Because they told him that in Colón [he could get land], and it was true then, but luck was not on our side and we failed.”

It all started according to plan. Gonzalo’s father went first by himself to the department of Colón and got this firsthand account of the local fertility and access to land. Once he secured six hectares of land, he returned to Yoro to collect the family, leave the little land that he had in the care of one of his brothers, and move to Masicales. According to Gonzalo, “we arrived on March 5, 1974. I remember well. We came just in the middle of spring season. My dad, since he came, he came strong. As soon as we arrived, he says ‘it is time to work.’”

This form of masculinity, based on physical labor on the land is pervasive. Gonzalo always remembers his dad in these terms, as someone who took great pride in his capacity to work: “my father, he makes the milpa, it was something positive. He was very happy. So much maize could be seen growing. Below they were like sugar canes [the maize plants], on the top, it was an exaggeration the size of those cobs! My dad would even laugh; ‘this is my place’ he would say.”

Nature, in the form of this ultra-fertile land, appears here like a blessing for Gonzalo and his family. As they harvested the milpa, the land of Masicales condensed a set of social relations that would translate into a better life. However, what nature gives, nature takes, and in September,

Fifi comes in around midnight. That hurricane with water. Oh my god! And everything moving, and all that water! And then at sunrise the hurricane passed and the water was getting inside the house. There was a levee there, left by one of the [banana] companies. And the house was edging to one side and my father yells ‘Oh my god! The hurricane destroyed my milpa!’

The rain and wind lasted all night and the next morning they decided to move to the nearby town of Sonaguera and to never return to Masicales. A shelter was set up in the local parish, but after a few days Gonzalo’s dad decided that everything was lost and it was necessary
to start anew. Gonzalo remembers his dad saying “we already lost those lands. We should think no longer of the Masicales that was destroyed. Today, we are left in poverty. Let´s search for a place, I am going to look for a place to settle in the hills, in this town [Sonaguera] there is nothing for us to do, sons.’ So my father leaves for a place called Lorencito, above Sonaguera.”

They remained in Lorencito for nine years. During this period they rented land and repeated the patterns of migratory agriculture that I already mentioned: “then, we would spend years making potreros [pastures] for the ganaderos [cattle ranchers]. There were times when they would only let us have one harvest and that was it; enter the lot, plant the milpa and work keeping it nice and clean. Then we had to leave and search for another place to start again.”

By this time Gonzalo was in his early 20s, and his father decided once more that they should move in search of land that they could call theirs; up in the hills appeared to be the only way to go. Gonzalo reports that his father told him,

‘Let’s go look son for a place where we can at least work, let´s look for a mountain. I have been told, that here in Colón there are empty mountains still, but that we can´ t get there, because we don´t know the way. I´m going to search for the mountain.’ We had been ruined after all that happened [in Masicales], but, well, that is life. So we took off. My dad told my mom: ‘viejita, prepare some tamalones, I am going to go up those mountains.’

Their route was slow, as they inched forward and up the mountains. Gonzalo remembers it well:

We started walking, I went with him, the other boys stayed back home with my mom. We walked, asking in each aldea, ‘Where does this path takes us?’ ‘To a place called Sabalito, but it is very far,’ they would respond. ‘And where are you headed?’ And we would answer, ‘we are looking for a place to work.’ And we would continue walking. In those times, there were almost no roads, only small paths going up and up the hill, little paths between guaimiles, pieces of mountain.

Eventually they reach a place, far up the hills and at the end of the track that they have being following. There they found a house and asked the man who lived whether he knew where they could find land to work.
‘Don’t worry gentlemen. Tomorrow I will take you to a place and I am going to give you a piece of land. I am going to take up to the place [up the mountain] where we got to, and from there onwards we are going to give it to you.’ He told us, but half joking. We were so happy. Next day we woke up. His wife gave us coffee and then he took us up the mountain. ‘My son Noé and I got up until here. From here onwards is yours.’

So we got out our machetes and began working. We worked until we ran out of tamalones. Then we stopped working and went back, bringing the news of the free land that we had found; and thus, we began to travel and travel and to work. And since we were the sons of Domingo, of my father, we went fixing mountains, guaimiles, doing things and planting. Until eventually my dad grew old.

I would like to stop for a minute to reflect on some of the more salient elements illuminated by Gonzalo’s testimony. First, the journey that took his parents from the department of La Paz to the mountains of Colón was structured around dynamics of dispossession and the tensions between labor capture and flight. Each step was marked by both the search for land to work to improve their living conditions and the failure or loss of that dream. However, this search was not articulated only around having enough to eat or a piece of land to work; no matter how limited, those elements were always available. It was also shaped by a particular understanding of how the relationship with subsistence ought to be. Gonzalo’s dad was looking for land that he could call his without having to “give his lungs to someone else” – as peasants in Honduras tend to refer to toiling for other’s benefit – and that through his hard work would produce plenty for living well. To do so, he and his family ended up travelling continuously and eventually higher and higher up in the hills, further and further away from the sites of capital accumulation and state control. We can read this journey as one of flight from labor capture.

Second, we can see how his patterns of mobility were defined or at least punctuated by a set of complex relationships of kinship and with nature. On the one hand, kinship took the form of following the family and respecting a certain form of authority that rested on his dad; his flight became his family’s flight. On the other hand, nature was understood by Gonzalo as both benevolent – as with the ultra-fertility of the lands in the Aguán – and destructive, as in the case
of Hurricane Fifi. Further, it was through their labor on nature that they fought against the obstacles of life; each cycle of dispossession was followed by one of migrating and more work.

This second point is better exemplified by turning to Emilio’s story. Emilio was born in Copán in 1957. When he turned 17, he decided to move away and follow his grandparents who lived in “La Costa” (The Coast), as Hondurans refer to the country’s north coast. They had left Copán a few years before, due to a problem with the municipality in which they had lost their lands; as usual, migration began with dispossession. Emilio lived with his grandparents for a few years. However, life was never easy and they did not manage to access land, so they decided to move to Colón. This decision was influenced by the tales that circulated regarding the fertile and open access lands that could be found in this department, but also because one of the brothers of his grandparents was already living there and told him that there was a farm that he could negotiate to buy.

Once in Colón, they settled in the hills just outside of Sonaguera, in the same town of Lorencito, but a few years after Gonzalo and his family had left. There he worked with his granddad taking care of the animals that they had: a few cows, pigs and chickens. Once there, he met his soon to be wife, María, who was also from Copán and whose family had also migrated to Colón. “We began [our life together], and then I got involved as a delegado de la palabra [church’s delegate of the word] and she also started working as a catechist. Working on the materials [for building a home] and on the crops, buying a few animals of our own; creating a formal patrimony of our own. Then, after a year we got married.”

Not long after, they had to leave Lorencito, as Emilio’s granddad told him that he was going to give all of the land that he had to a younger son that he had with another woman (not Emilio’s mother). He and his family migrated to Olanchito in the department of Yoro. The decision to move there was informed by the fact that some friends from back home in Copán living there. Once in Olanchito Emilio was able to join an agrarian reform cooperative. Here again we can see how kinship structured the migration routes. First it was Emilio following his
grandparents to *La Costa*, then it was them following a brother to Lorencito, and then it was he – and the new family he was building with Maria – setting off to Olanchito, thanks to the support of friends. Also, from his grandparents’ losing their land to the municipality in Copán, to his having to leave to Olanchito, dispossession was always what triggered the start of migration.

It is important to add that this is never a mechanical relation. First, dispossession has to always be read in a broader context. For example, Emilio’s grandparents losing their land to the municipality was part of a broader process of primitive accumulation in which land considered “national” was taken away from individuals and communities that had been living and working on it for many years (Boyer 1982). This process of dispossession did not necessarily translate into migrating towards the north coast. His grandparents could have stayed and worked as day laborers. Also, migrating to the north coast could have involved looking for work in the banana plantations, but it did not. Dispossession framed and structured the space in which particular groups could decide their fate and in the cases we have been exploring in this section, these decisions pointed towards flight and against labor capture and thus, to remain outside the purview of the state and the agrarian reform.

*The Aguán and its tensions*

So far in this chapter, I have analyzed the process by which hundreds of poor peasant families migrated from other parts of the country – mainly the west and south – and how they settled either in the valley or in the hills. I have shown how these patterns of mobility were deeply informed by the ways in which each family responded to the dynamics of dispossession in their hometowns. I have also demonstrated that their journeys towards the east – as Mission 105 called it – far from representing an escape from dispossession and labor capture, became a reenactment of both in a different context.

For those families that came and joined the cooperatives, access to land came at the steep price of reshaping their ways of being in the world. Social relations, revolved around the
production of staple crops, usually combined with day labor, and deeply ingrained ideas of
independence and family labor. These had to give way to collective labor and external discipline,
which shifted the balance even more from self-provisioning to wage labor. Once in the
cooperatives, men had little control over what was produced. This was particularly salient after
the destruction unleashed by hurricane Fifi, which delivered them into the hands of the INA and
the oil palm promotion projects. I will delve more deeply into the relation between the
cooperatives and palm oil industry in the next chapter, when I discuss the conditions that led to
the sale of many of the cooperatives. At present, I would like to focus on a couple of related
issues.

First, in terms of the internal dynamics of the peasant household, the cooperatives – just
as in any case in which the balance shifts more towards wage labor – meant a more acute
differentiation between what was understood as production – collective male work in the fields
– and reproduction – domestic “unproductive” female labor in the households. Thus, women’s
contribution to the provisioning and subsistence of their families was rendered invisible.
Further, as Roquas (2002) has argued, the Honduran agrarian reform was based on a “land to
the tiller” model, under which access to land or membership is based on work being done on the
fields; reproducing quite blatantly this production/reproduction split. Since women did not
“till,” they could not have access to the land – membership in this case – and thus were placed in
a very vulnerable position in regards to their partners and the cooperatives. For example,
Roquas records various conversations in which women speak of the necessity of never leaving
the home and trying to remain with their husbands, as this was the only way in which they could
maintain a claim on the land.

The way in which the cooperatives operated did not create a sense of belonging in
relation to the land that was supposedly theirs; women were placed in a situation in which land
was seen as more valuable – as it meant forms of nourishment for their families – but at the
same time, with less leverage to “defend it.” As we will see in the next chapter, these two
elements combined in the aftermath of the early 1990s cooperatives’ land sales to place women at the forefront of the resistance against dispossession.

Second, the differentiation between the peasant cooperatives and the independent peasant, to which Luis refer in such lively terms in his testimony, had a very particular effect in the landscape of the valley. The cooperatives, and thus the valley, particularly the right bank of the Aguán River, came to be associated with a set of practices and forms of social control. This was the place of the oil palms labyrinths, but also the seat of the INA; a place where you could find better access to services such as education and health, but also of tighter social control, discipline and little control over production. It was also a place with better infrastructure and better access to the market. This concentration of elements and services around the city of Tocoa created a set of binary relations with other parts of the valley.

I have already mentioned the differentiation between left and right banks; let’s develop it more. While the more successful palm oil producing cooperatives – mostly affiliated to FECORAH – concentrate around the right bank, most of the staple crops producing ones – mainly affiliated to ANACH – were located on the left bank. This had to do both with market access, but also with support by the state. However, this differentiation was not only in productive terms. It also reflected in the way in which the state approached each bank. As I mentioned, the most important state institutions were based in Tocoa or around the city. The only exception was the army, as the 15th Battalion is located on the left bank, close to the community of Honduras Aguán. Further, as I also mentioned, landowners always had a freer hand to deal with land occupations than those of the right bank. To this we must add, that the levels of state repression were – and are – always higher in the left bank than in the right bank.

A second and even more crucial spatial differentiation was that between the valley – with its better infrastructure, access to market, public services and state support –; and the surrounding hills –which had less access to these elements, but due to that same social distance from capital and state, provided a greater sense of freedom and autonomy.
James Scott (2009) has argued for the Southeast Asian case that historically there has been a tension between the state – with its processes of subject formation and economic taxation – and certain “zones of refuge,” a notion that he borrows from the Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1967). These regions are at the margins and beyond the reach of the state, and various social groups there have organized themselves in opposition to the states from which they were fleeing, an idea that Scott develops from his reading of Pierre Clastres (1989). He argues further, that this tension usually takes the form an opposition between the lowlands – as the place of control of the state – and hills and mountains as the privileged zones of refuge, due to their remoteness and the difficulties of controlling them.

In a situation close to the one described by Scott, and that can be also found in other parts of Latin America (see for example, Herrera 2002; Turits 2004; Gordillo 2004), in the Aguán a deep contrast came to be produced between the valley and the hills. This difference was informed by different elements: social and physical distance from state power and sites of capital accumulation; the reasons behind people either settling in the valley or in the hills; and even climate, as people coming from the west, with their deeply ingrained sense of autonomy and independence, preferred the cooler temperatures of the hills to the warmer climate at the valley.

Further, as time went by, and the grip of the INA and the state in more general terms got tighter, this differentiation expanded and extended to include a set of migration movements between valley and hills. In his book on the BAP, the Jesuit priest Angel Castro (1994) dedicates a whole section to those families that had decided to move and settle in the hills. He was particularly interested in understanding why anyone would decide to live in such a remote and isolated place. For him, this movement was from valley to hills in the mid to late 1980s was directly related to the high desertion levels that the cooperatives have: “besides the hard work, a peasant discipline was needed, to which you had to add the ecological conditions that weighed
down on their health, particularly that of the children. Due to this, in the cooperatives there were numerous desertions.” (p. 61).

Castro found various reasons as to why people decided to leave the valley and move up the hills. One of his informants mentions: “I remained in Tocoa for three years. I was affiliated with a construction cooperative. But it was not successful because the treasurer stole the money... Only a few remained. There were attempts to work the land, but we couldn’t because it was occupied” (p. 113).

According to another testimony, “a relative of mine who knew the place encouraged me to come. I sold what I had and bought in Jazmines [in the hills] a 30-hectare farm. I bought the house of someone who now lives in the valley. The land here is good; those who come love it here” (p. 114).

The first thing to notice from these micro-vignettes is the importance of kin relations in the migrating patterns: most of the people Castro interviewed came to the hills because a relative told them that there was free land to be had. Second, the hills appear as an alternative to the problems in the valley, where access to land was all the time becoming harder. According to Castro,

those who came [to the hills] between 1979 and 1984... share in common not having belonged to any organized group, either in the valley or their place of origin. Those who had participated briefly in a peasant settlement or in a cooperative had done so briefly and only while an already settled relative or friend provided them with a place. Also, for many, the hills appeared initially a place of safety, because they can experience the satisfaction of working for themselves, where nobody bothers you and you can cultivate everything.

However, Castro continues telling us,

... this safety is shattered because, either the land has to be bought from those who arrived first and enclosed large extensions... or they had to take possession of a piece of land deeper in the mountain; in this case, they ran the risk of being expelled legally, as it happened to a whole village that was evicted, since the State declared a good part of the mountainous territory national property and a forestry reserve. (p. 115).
Here we see again the hills as a space of freedom and survival. However, this now interacts directly with the closing of the agrarian frontier, which at the same time signals an open conflict with the state and its forestry policy. In this line, and according to the same author, the latter migrants to arrive the hills, from the 1980s onwards, were limited to three options: first, “working in someone else’s land that was yet to be cleared down, in exchange of having a single harvest,” since, if they wanted to keep the land they had to buy it; 2. “...move deeper into the mountain and clear a piece of land...”; and 3. “...finally, there were those who decided to go down to the valley, even if only in search of a free space to build their home.” (p. 115).

It is also important to add that, as I have been arguing, this differentiation between valley and hills did not only respond to a temporal dynamic, or that those who got up to the valley later, were forced to climb up the hills due to the lack of space. The hills also presented themselves as an alternative for those in search of safety and a sense of freedom, which for many peasants made it more appealing than what they understood to be the work in the cooperatives. One of those peasants interviewed by Castro in the hills affirmed,

I don’t agree with the cooperatives, because you are under the charge of someone else and get fooled by the bigger ones. In the cooperatives, I am owner of my wage, not of my work and sometimes not even of the wage. That is why I looked for the hills. One is used to working, and here, there is no money, but there is plenty to eat. (p.117)

Another of Castro’s informants mentions that “...people go off to the mountain so that they are not dominated and can do their own thing every day. In the cooperative, however, they have to work daily and have to follow mandatory rules. In the mountain it is better; the hard thing is to take out the produce (p.118).”

These tensions – between left and right bank and between mountain and hill – will inform much of what I will be discussing in the next chapters. It is now time to move forward in time, to the beginning of the 1990s, to explore the situation of the cooperatives, their relation
with the palm oil assemblage, and the eventual sale of more than half the cooperatives that were created during the agrarian reform period.
Chapter 3. The global palm oil assemblage: development, rent capture and primitive accumulation

For Eugenia it all began with the cows. She remembers it well. In the mid-1980s, the cooperative that she and Martino belonged to had bought a few milk cows. These cows would rotate between the different affiliated families; for two days each they would care for them, and for two days each they would have milk for their children. “Oh! I was so happy every time the children went with their pots to bring milk to drink. When they began attempting to sell the cooperative, then they came and said ‘we have to sell the cows, because we are going to sell the palm trees.’”

The discussion regarding the probable sale of the cooperative’s land – equated here with the palm trees – had begun some time ago, but it would not be until the cows came under threat in the mid-1990s that Eugenia, as well as other women, understood what was at stake and took action. She would soon move around the Aguán valley, looking for allies – any allies – that would aid her in her struggle against the selling of the land and thus, the loss of the cows. For all practical matters, her crusade to stop the sale of the cooperatives failed and by the end of the 1990s much of the everyday life and landscape of the Aguán had drastically changed. In analytical terms, however, Eugenia’s struggle can be used to illustrate and analyze the complex, conflictive and multi-scalar process that led to the appropriation, by a limited group of large landowners and transnational companies, of around two-thirds of the agrarian reform land that was distributed before 1992.

To tell the story of Eugenia’s struggle, we need to also tell other stories that are not only interconnected, but that are in many respects the same story. Nationally, the sale of the cooperatives must be understood as part of the broader process of structural adjustment and economic liberalization experienced by Honduras, and most of Latin America, from the 1980s and 1990s onwards. Globally, the interest in buying lands covered in African palm trees is part
of the broader process by which a set of different places of production, commercialization and consumption came to create what we could call the global palm oil assemblage.

I would like to approach the topic of the sale of the cooperative lands through a twofold movement. In the first section of this chapter, I will explore the conditions of possibility of the land sales, by analyzing how the palm oil industry was assembled in Honduras. To do so, I will approach the issue from three different standpoints. Locally, I begin by picking up where the last chapter left off and describe the situation of the reform sector – as the agrarian reform cooperatives are collectively known – in the early 1990s, around the time that the sales began. Here, I will treat the Aguán and the reform sector almost as a closed system, in an attempt to highlight some of the main characteristics that help explain the sales, particularly the forms in which rent was captured. Next, I will move to the national scale to characterize very briefly the process of structural adjustment and its particular agrarian manifestation in the Agricultural Development and Modernization Bill (LMA). I am interested in showing the changes in the legal and regulatory framework that opened up the door for the sales. Finally, I step back and look at the historical rise of palm oil as a global commodity, the general characteristics of the industry and its introduction and consolidation in Honduras. It is important to add that I do not understand these three standpoints from an encompassment logic in which the local is seen as contained in the national and the national in the global. Rather, I approach them as a set of various processes that took place in different scales, but that folded back upon themselves, thus providing different vantage points from which to gaze at the conditions that shaped the process of land appropriation and dispossession.

In the second part of the chapter, I will collapse these dimensions into the particular experience of the sale of one individual, Eugenia, whom we met in the last chapter, as a way of exploring both the process of dispossession and the particular forms that the palm oil ensemble assumed in the Aguán.
The rise of the global palm oil assemblage

The starting point of my understanding of the palm oil assemblage is Michael Watts’ (2012) notion of the oil (or petroleum) assemblage. According to Watts,

...an oil assemblage is ... a coordinated but dispersed set of regulations, calculative arrangements, infrastructural and technical procedures that render certain objects or flows governable. An oil assemblage is a sort of vast governable, and occasionally very ungovernable, space. If the oil assemblage is a space of standardization, its operations, however, are always temporally and geographically contingent. (p.443)

His focus is on the political economy of oil and of thinking about the different sort of relations that articulate the diverse spaces – always temporally and geographically contingent – of production, commercialization and consumption, in its different forms, of oil. According to Watts, “a key starting point is to see oil and gas as a global production network with particular properties, actors, networks, governance structures, institutions, and organizations (a global value chain in the industry argot) but what is, in effect, a regime of accumulation and a mode of regulation” (Watts 2012).

The use that I would like to give to the concept is somewhat different from Watts’, however. Rather than focusing on this from the perspective of the global – of how the global network articulates the different spaces of production, commercialization and consumption – I am interested in exploring how these articulations are initiated, gain traction and are institutionalized in those particular contexts. I borrow part of this understanding from the notion of ensemble introduced by Antonio Gramsci. In a section of the Prison Notebooks titled “What is Man?” he argues that:

The humanity which is reflected in each individuality is composed of various elements: 1. the individual; 2. other men; 3. the natural world. But the latter two elements are not as simple as they might appear. The individual does not enter into relations with other men by juxtaposition, but organically, in as much, that is, as he belongs to organic entities which range from the simplest to the most complex. Thus Man does not enter into relations with the natural world just by being himself part of the natural world, but actively, by means of work and technique... It is not enough to know the ensemble of
relations as they exist at any given time as a given system. They must be
known genetically, in the movement of their formation. For each individual is the
synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations.
He is a précis of all the past. (1971:352–353)

I am interested in approaching the global palm oil industry from the perspective of how
it informs or to a certain extent structures the three levels of analysis proposed by Gramsci.
Phrased differently, I intend to analyze the ways in which different social groups and individuals
are located and enter in relations with the broader processes of the regime of accumulation and
the mode of regulation of the global palm oil industry, and their immediate geographical and
historical context. With this in mind, I will now move to look at the three folds or entry points
proposed before. I begin from the standpoint of the reform sector in the Aguán.

First fold: the Aguán’s reformed sector just before the counter-reform

In societies in which revenues depend on the commodification of nature, rent capture
conditions the organization of economic activities.

Fernando Coronil (1997:32), The Magical State

As we saw in the last chapter, the Aguán had been the centerpiece of the agrarian reform project
of the 1970s and 1980s. It had been mainly through the combination of the cooperatives’ cheap
labor and the injection of financial capital by and through the state that a region that
traditionally had been seen as empty and virgin became a landscape dominated by palm oil
plantations, manned and controlled by the agrarian reform cooperatives and much more
densely populated. However, by the mid-1990s and with the advent of the LMA, it came to be
known as the “capital of the agrarian counter-reform” (Macías 2001).

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50 I am interested in doing a similar shift to the one proposed by Gillian Hart (2002:294) to move away
from globalization as a central analytical category: “Instead, the focus shifts to situated everyday practices,
their spatial interconnections, and the changing forms of spatial organization of social relations, where
those social relations are full of power and meaning, and where social groups are very differently placed in
relation to this reorganization... It also directs our attention to the multiplicity of historical geographies,
not simply as the effects of global flows but rather as constitutive of them.”
To place this shift in its context, between 1990 and 1994 more than half of the land that was distributed nationally during the agrarian reform was sold; in the case of the Bajo Aguán, this number rises to a staggering 73.8 percent,\textsuperscript{51} representing around 15 percent of the total area of the region (COCOCH 2010). The process that led to the sale of these lands was ruthless, combining both high and open levels of violence with more traditional “market” land transactions. However, as much as the external elements – such as the LMA – and the participation of large Honduran landowners are part of the explanations for the sales, a significant amount of the blame rests with the cooperatives themselves and how the reform sector operated in the Aguán.

According to data from 1991, most of the land in production in the Aguán Valley was dedicated to cattle ranching; 16,000 hectares were in oil palms and 14,000 hectares in citrus trees. Around 30,000 hectares were under staple crops (maize, rice and beans) (Salgado 1994). At the time, growing oil palms was almost exclusively done by the agrarian reform cooperatives (96 percent) and a significant part of the extension dedicated to both citrus trees (around 30 percent) and staple crops (around 47 percent) was also part of the land distributed to the cooperatives. This means that by the 1990s, the Aguán was divided between two main forms of production. On the one hand, the cattle ranchers maintained a dominant position in the region. On the other, there was a dynamic sector of cooperatives (over 130) dedicated to export-oriented crops (oil palm and citrus) and staple crops, mainly for the domestic market. As we saw in the last chapter, in most cases the cooperatives began planting staple crops, but eventually, and due to the pressure from INA and the massive leverage that it had in terms of debt and technical support, shifted towards export-oriented crops, particularly oil palm. However, not all

\textsuperscript{51} Twenty thousand nine hundred thirty hectares sold, out of the original 28,365 hectares distributed (COCOCH 2010:24).
cooperatives entered palm production, choosing instead to continue producing staple crops or combining these with other crops such as plantain and citrus trees, and renting land for grazing.

In very general terms, the cooperatives that made the shift towards export-oriented crops were those that were older, located on the right bank of the river and closer to Tocoa. Since the state financed and promoted these cash crops to the detriment of staple crops, it concentrated on those places where its influence was stronger. Since the initial development of the Bajo Aguán Project was in the right bank, where most of the infrastructure and state institution were located, it was here also where the cultivation of these crops began. From there, they extended outwards spreading to most of the valley. Nineteen seventy-five, 1977 and 1979 are particularly salient years in most cooperative members’ memories regarding the spread of oil palms. As the 1980s rolled in and the BAP began to run out of steam, the National Agrarian Institute (INA) lost interest in promoting and expanding the reform sector and the financial resources began to dwindle and with them, the growth of the extension of land dedicated to palm; thus the newer cooperatives had a harder time making the transition towards export-oriented crops, as they received little to no support for the transition.

The difference was also informed politically, as historically those cooperatives associated with the state-created and -sponsored Honduran Federation of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives (FECORAH) had more access to resources and state support than independent cooperatives or those associated with other peasant federations and thus also a better chance of turning towards oil palms and citrus trees. The state’s reading of the different cooperatives was deeply informed by the Cold War climate and the National Security paradigm, where anything that remained outside the direct control or interest of members from the state, was seen as a threat to the nation and thus justifying military intervention. For example, in 1977, the military occupied

52 For an in-depth ethnographic study on national security doctrine, see Leslie Gill’s (2004) study of the so-called School of the Americas.
the Isletas Peasant Enterprise (EACI), a major banana producer, incarcerating some of the main leaders. The reason for this occupation was the attempt by a group of members to promote the cultivation of staple crops and animal husbandry (maize, rice and pig production) as a way of attaining some sort of economic autonomy in their outgrowing relation with the Standard Fruit Company (SFC) (Posas 1992).

In terms of livelihood, what the cooperatives produced made a difference. The initial idea of the Bajo Aguán Project (BAP) was to bring poor peasant families into the cash economy. For this to work, they had to be able to produce something for the market that would give them enough monetary return as to be able to both pay their debts to the state – in the form of loans for production and the payment for the agrarian reform land – and still have enough to sustain themselves. If we were to model this process from the perspective of the cooperatives, it would look something like this: the state, using international loans, injected money (M) into the reformed sector; that money was used to buy the means of production (C) for the cultivation of the crops; which later were sold to produce a profit (M’) that would allow the cooperatives to not only pay their off their loans, but have enough to sustain themselves and start the process anew. Formally then, we would have a system, from the perspective of the cooperatives, which looks like this: M – C – M’.

This model of course resembles the formula of capital presented by Marx (1992) in Volume 1 of Capital. However, Indian Economist Kalyan Sanyal (2013) has made the persuasive argument that there are other types of economic enterprises that operate under this same model, but are ruled by a different logic. Dubbed by Sanyal as “need economies,” these enterprises begin with some sort of monetary fund (the INA funneled loans in our case), which is used to buy certain means of production (everything necessary to grow oil palms), which are then sold for a surplus. Now, unlike capitalist ventures, the need economies use just enough of this surplus in restarting the cycle, and the rest is spent in consumption for the members of the need economy. In this sense, if for the capitalist venture accumulation for accumulation’s sake is
the final goal, for the need economies it is full employment and making enough money as to assure each member a good enough income to survive. As we will see later, this was not always the case.

In the next section I will discuss how the palm oil produced in the region was used outside of the region. At the moment I would like to focus on how this monetary surplus being created by the cooperatives (M’) was divided between debt payment and the social reproduction (wages) of the cooperative members. According to the three studies that analyze in some depth the process of the land sales in the Aguán (Macías 2001; Rubén and Funez 1993; Castro 1994) this was always a thorny topic, as one of the biggest and most constant complaints of the cooperatives had to do with how little revenue they received from the cultivation of oil palms and the alarming levels of internal corruption. Further, they connected their low incomes with the palm trees themselves. In the last chapter, we saw Eugenia’s and Marino’s reflections on this point, but they were not the only ones. Castro (1994:106) records in his book a member of the same cooperative that Eugenia and Marino belong to, claiming that “…in his cooperative things were not going well because [it seemed that] the palm trees were on the payroll…”

Moreover, the issue was not only how little they got paid and how the palm trees seemed to be keeping a part of the profit. There were also tensions around the uneven distribution of income between the different cooperatives. Castro (1994) compares the income of an average member of two palm oil producing cooperatives with the income of the staple crop cooperative members. He finds that while the first two reported an income per member of around 300-400 Lempiras a month ($150 to $200), the latter ones received a maximum monthly income of around 150 Lempiras ($75) (Castro 1994:109). If we take into account that the two cooperatives analyzed by Castro are from the left bank and were part of the later waves of promotion of African palm production, it is to be expected that their income was smaller than that of older cooperatives located closer to Tocoa. In fact, in the same study, Castro mentions that an informant told him that La Salamá cooperative, the first created in the Aguán, had a collective
biweekly income of 70,000 to 80,000 Lempiras (p. 108). In general, cooperatives from this period had around 50 associates, which meant that a good estimate of the monthly income of a member of La Salamá was of around 1,400 to 1,600 Lempiras ($700 to $800). Even after subtracting the income used to amortize debts and invest in equipment or production, the story told by this data is that there was a clear economic chasm between producing palm oil and producing staple crops; also that there were some evident differences among the cooperatives according to their location in the valley.

In a rather different vein, through this process of differentiation, a moderately prosperous – by Honduran standards, that is – rural middle class was being created. This is, of course, one of the most salient features of the far more successful South Korean and Taiwanese agrarian reforms (Kay 2002). At the same time, it is also one of the main characteristics that Lenin found in the process of capital accumulation in the Russian countryside and that led to the creation of a well-to-do peasant stratum, which eventually hired the poorer peasants as wage laborers (Lenin 1956; see also Bernstein 2010; Shanin 1982). As we will see, the results in the Aguán were somewhere in between.

In general, all the cooperatives had problems making ends meet, as debt service, volatile prices and embezzlement by cooperative leaders hit hard the earnings of even the palm oil producing cooperatives, as we will see later. However, while palm oil producing cooperatives were successful – albeit poor – need economies, members of the staple crop cooperatives had to look for outside jobs – mainly in the oil palm cooperatives or on the citrus tree plantations – to

53 This was not the only explanation given for the process of peasant differentiation in Russia. According to the Russian agricultural economist Aleksandr Chayanov (1966), the apparent inequality among peasant households had more to do with the location of the households in the demographic cycle than with class dynamics (see Bernstein 2009 for a comparison of both thinkers). For the particular case of the Aguán, where most of the families enrolled in the cooperatives were located in a similar position in the demographic cycle, Chayanov's approach does not take us too far.
round up their incomes, thus promoting a sort of permanent semi-proletarianization. However, the fact that they were producing a central part of their diet meant that their reliance on wages was not as heavy as was the case for members of the oil palm cooperatives. This too of course, became a vicious circle in which what little income could be created through the sale of the maize, beans and rice, had to be used to keep up with debt service, thus forcing the members to work more outside of the cooperative. That was the price of not accommodating – either by choice or by a lack of it – to the designs of the INA and the Honduran state and the oil palm monoculture.

The landscape of the Aguán in the 1990s was the result of how capital and labor flows were brought together and interacted with the particular physical and historical geography of the region. The state – through a set of international loans – pumped capital into the region with the objective of creating a set of cash crop producing and politically docile cooperatives. Which crop they produced made a difference in their financial wellbeing; but which crop they produced was informed by their geographical location in the region, and this in turn had to do with the period in which each cooperative was formed and to which peasant federation they were affiliated, since all of these elements influenced whether they received state support or not. This situation was riddled with tensions and points of friction in which conflicts tended to arise within and among the cooperatives, as well as between the reform sector and state institutions.

These conflicts centered mainly on how the surplus that was being produced by the cooperatives was being extracted and distributed. One thing that I found from speaking to people in the region and reading the scant written work on the topic is that people in the Aguán had an acute sense of what was going on. This was not clearly articulated or spelled out, but instead was spoken of in an indirect form. In general, they identified two main mechanisms as

54 For a development of the semi-proletarianization thesis see (Kay 1997; Moyo and Yeros 2005); for a critique, see (Bernstein 2006).
ways in which the value that they produced was taken from them. The first had to do with toiling for the benefit of someone else who profited from their labor. This mechanism was most often located in the relations between the cooperatives or the peasantry as a more extensive category, and other classes, such as the cattle ranchers, the banana companies or even the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) (recall in last chapter how they use to refer to the palm trees as the IADB’s property). The second mechanism had to do more with the relation with other members of the same class position and used to be spoken about in terms of corruption — of enrichment not based on producing value, but on capturing rent (what is known in organizational literature as “elite capture” (Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013). In this sense, corruption seems to be operating in a similar vein to that described by Simon Turner (2007:125–26) for the Burundi case. He argues that “...corruption narratives seek to unravel power by trying to unveil hidden connections and causalities. In this manner they attempt to explain success of some politicians and the misfortune of others, relying on a perception of political power as depending heavily on hidden practices and on concealing true intentions.”

These two mechanisms – speaking of toiling for the benefit of others and corruption – became a form of talking about the different types of class relations, as well as the processes by which internal differentiation within the reform sector were being produced. Let’s remember that initially the reform sector in the Aguán shared an egalitarianism born out of poverty. Both the immigrants and the local communities that came together in the agrarian reform cooperatives had very similar class backgrounds. However, as time went by, and as I have noted, internal differentiation within poverty arose, both within the cooperatives and among them — differentiation that manifested itself quite blatantly in their respective incomes. Thus, by looking at those points from where differentiation arose, we can look at the same time at how rent was being captured and by whom, thus getting a better idea of how the valley’s landscape was produced.
With this in mind, we can think of the points of rent capture as being located along three main axes: state-reform sector relations; relations among cooperatives; and relations within the cooperatives. Regarding the state-reform sector axis, this was the main and more evident point of friction in the region. As I have already mentioned in various places, the way in which this was first and foremost experienced was in the low “wages” that the members received in the cooperatives. I put wages in quotation marks because from the perspective of the state and the BAP, these were supposed to be funds advanced to the cooperative members from the future revenues that their land would generate (De Fontenay 1999).

However, behind these low wages were more sophisticated forms in which rents were being captured from the cooperatives by the state. Besides the most evident question as to why poor peasants that were being settled on national land had to buy the land from the state, it was mainly through debt that rent was being extracted from the cooperatives. For example, once the oil palms began to be planted, the cooperatives were required to pay a fee of 65 Lempiras per hectare (around $33) over a period of 20 years. This was financed through the loans that the country had signed with the IADB and the USAID. Both loans had interest rates of 4 percent; however the state collected 11 percent from the peasant cooperatives (it was later reduced to 8 percent) (Castro 1994), thus not only transferring the costs of the loans to the reform sector, but also making a profit in the process.

If debt was one of the main forms of rent capture by the state, the other was to be found in the process of industrialization and commercialization of palm oil. Since the initial plan of the BAP, the idea was that an industrial sector would be developed to add value to the production of the raw material and thus vertically integrate the sector. This of course was oriented towards

55 The Chilean Jacques Chonchol (1962) argued that paying for the land – especially at market prices – would negatively affect the agrarian reform in more general terms. According to him, the more money that was directed towards paying for the land, the less that could be invested in the other elements needed for production (roads, schools, etc.).
keeping a larger amount of value in the region and thus, an improvement of the cooperatives economic situation. Also, it would facilitate the process of rent capture, as the whole activity would be in fewer hands. It was also a necessary condition for the development of the palm oil industry, as the harvested fruit from the palms has to be processed quickly.

Already in 1975, the INA constructed a pilot harvesting mill. Later, in 1977 a second larger mill was constructed, and yet another one in 1979. Seeing that there was a profit to be made in this way, in 1979 the governing military junta issued two Decrees (774 and 810), giving birth to the Agro-industrial Cooperative of African Palm (COAPALMA) on February 18, 1980, with an initial capital of more than 35 million Lempiras (around $18 million) (Castro 1994). Initially, however, both the extracting mills and COAPALMA were administered directly by state structures, and thus the cooperatives were kept on the margins of the industrialization and commercialization process. The idea was that once the state recovered its investment and paid off its loans to international creditors, it would gradually cede control to the cooperatives. However, this idea was rejected by members of the cooperatives who felt that they had little or no control over their own production and went on strike on September, 1980, for more than two weeks. The main objective was to gain control over the direction and administration of COAPALMA and to have both the cultivation and industrialization would be under the control of the cooperatives and not the state. As a result, on March 31, 1981 the National Congress voted and approved Decree 52, which gave full control of COAPALMA to the cooperatives (Macías 2001).

Catherine de Fontenay (1999), in an article on the application of the “big push doctrine”\textsuperscript{56} in northern Honduras, has an insightful reading of the struggle over COAPALMA and the 1981 strike. I quote her at length:

\textsuperscript{56} The Big Push theory was first presented by Paul Rosenstein-Rodan (1943; 1957) in the 1940s. According to this theory, underdeveloped countries needed to embark in large processes of capital investment and not in bit by bit programs. Further, Rosenstein-Rodan argued that the whole industry which was intended
Evidence suggests that the agency administering the mills, the National Agrarian Institute (INA), engaged in hold-up and rent-seeking itself. The local INA office was publicly denounced for activities such as ghost payrolling, stealing equipment, and other... [s]uch activities [that] increased the operational costs of the project, which was passed on to the cooperatives in the form of debt. Meanwhile all of the cooperatives' earnings went toward servicing this debt. The 'wages' paid to cooperatives, formally, their profits after deductions debt servicing, remained so low after inflation that they were described by the National Peasant's Union as ‘a miserable wage that has no relation to their actual needs and the real price of the product.’ (p. 16)

Although the 1980 strike was in response to exactly this type of behavior, the shift towards peasant control did not necessarily translate into a better performance. According to the same author:

The cooperatives, now in control of Coapalma, found that whoever they appointed to manage Coapalma would hold them up. Ownership of Coapalma granted palm cooperatives equal voting rights and the right to supply Coapalma’s labor force of 400 from its members and their families. But the cooperatives, as a whole, failed to receive the full benefits of ownership, because corruption developed within Coapalma, particularly in its board of directors. Cooperatives complained in interviews that the Board 'became wealthy overnight. They not only obtain high salaries, but they travel in luxury cars and they have built houses beyond their economic means.' (pp. 16-17)

Whoever was on top of COAPALMA was in a good situation to capture rent due to the dual role that they played. On the one hand, controlling COAPALMA meant basically controlling the commercialization and industrialization of palm oil in the whole region, and thus close to the totality of revenue produced by the sector had to pass through them, making the second-level cooperative –that is, a cooperative whose members are other cooperatives, not individuals– a highly profitable enterprise. On the other hand, since all of the oil palm cooperatives were at the moment members of COAPALMA (around 55), it became an organization with significant political clout; if the strike had shown something was that when the reform sector managed to gain some cohesion, it could confront state institutions directly. It should then come as no
to be developed had to be approached and planned as a single massive entity. In more historical terms, this theory, or variations of it, has been the basis for large colonization or valley development projects in different parts of the world.
surprise that one of the direct effects of the strike was the decision of the INA to stop promoting the creation of new cooperatives – as they were becoming harder and harder to control (Castro 1994).

We understand contract agriculture as a form of production that “...entails relations between growers and agro-capitals which substitute for open-market exchanges by linking 'independent family farmers' of widely variant assets with a central processing, export or purchasing unit which regulates price, production practices and credit arranged in advance under contract (Watts 1992:91). We can also see the case of COAPALMA as the first attempt to bring the whole palm oil industry in the region under external control. As we will see, this would not be the last time that this type of vertical integration was attempted nor the last time that the region’s peasant organizations would bring it to a halt.

These two situations – the control of COAPALMA by the cooperatives and the decision of the INA to halt the promotion of new cooperatives – serve as a stage for exploring the second of the three proposed axes of rent capture: the relations among the cooperatives. Although all of the oil palm cooperatives were supposed to have equal shares of power in COAPALMA, in practice some cooperatives were more equal than others. According again to de Fontaney (1999:17), once the cooperatives took control over the board of directors,

A subset of the cooperatives also profited from the situation, obtaining a disproportionate share of the high-wage employment at the plant and trickle-down benefits when a member belonged to the Board of Directors. Such “inside” groups tended to be those closest to headquarters and the largest town (with some exceptions), perhaps initially because they had more contact with Coapalma, and their families had better access to education to qualify for clerical jobs at the plant.

Apparently, corruption was profitable because “inside” cooperatives could extract rents from “outside” cooperatives. Coapalma functioned more and more as a monopsonist, purchasing cooperatives’ output and reaping high profits. The Board of Directors had broad discretion over the price of fruit, and was able to extract high rents without greater reprisal than a slight shift in factions at the following election.
More than creating something new, the struggle for the control of COAPALMA came to deepen the gap that existed between what de Fontaney calls the “inside” and “outside” cooperatives. These categories of “inside” and “outside” have a topographic element to them, as they overlap and give more substance to the geographical position of the different cooperatives within the landscape of the reform sector and the Aguán region. In general, the “inside” cooperatives were those closer to Tocoa, on the right bank and with a longer trajectory. The “outside” cooperatives were those further away from Tocoa, many from the left bank and newer. Federation affiliation also made a difference, as most inside cooperatives were associated with pro-government FECORAH, while outside ones tended to be affiliated with other federations such as the historically more combative ANACH. However, to have a fuller picture of the reform sector for this period we would have to add the staple crop producing cooperatives which were outside even of the purview of both the state and of most COAPALMA-affiliated cooperatives.

Quoting de Fontaney yet again, we can see how costs were transferred to the outside cooperatives in favor of the inside ones:

Internal documents from 1982 and 1986 verify that Coapalma collected 30 lempiras per ton toward reimbursing the state bank... But comparing the groups’ total debts to the state bank in 1985 and 1989 suggests that Coapalma overcharged groups by 67 percent on average, even at the 11 percent interest rate charged by the state bank. Simply incorporating this particular over-charge reduces the effective price by another 20 lempiras. And given that several insider cooperatives had no debts at all by 1989, it is likely that the burden of this overcharge fell on the “outside” cooperatives. (p. 18) 57

57 De Fontaney expands on this topic: “Beyond debts to the government for the initial planting costs, the cooperatives also incurred debts with Coapalma for some of their operating capital. Note that some self-styled “outside” cooperatives continued to incur debts with Coapalma, which would seem irrational if Coapalma extracts rents from the reimbursement process. But engineer Erlindo Calix of Standard Fruit noted that in addition to price differences, Coapalma often incurred substantial delays in paying for the fruit, relative to Standard’s weekly payments. These delays were shorter for ‘inside’ cooperatives. Slow disbursement is likely to lead to debt among cooperatives, who were otherwise credit-constrained: six producers referred to the debt-trap cycle in their relations with Coapalma (Interviews, 1995). Then
This situation had different effects. The first and most evident is that, at the same time that this surplus was extracted from COAPALMA in the form of debt service – above the level of the interest rate being paid by the state – it was also extracted from the outside cooperatives by the inside ones. Besides the impoverishing effect that this dynamic had, it also created differentiation among the cooperatives by forming a three-tier system that mirrored the class system described by Lenin (1956) for the nineteenth-century Russian case: on top the inside cooperatives, below the outside ones and at the bottom the staple crops cooperatives. This differentiation was also reflected in the political and social perspective that the different groups had of each other. For example, there has been a historical resentment from the outside and staple crops cooperatives towards the members of COAPALMA and other do-well cooperatives, such as La Salamá. This resentment gets articulated in the form of claims that they have been allied with the terratenientes [large landowners]. Moreover, that the “inside” cooperatives exploited the others not only through the debt relation with COAPALMA that I have been discussing, but also through hiring their labor, as many of the members of the poorer cooperatives tended to work as day laborers in the better-off cooperatives.

Another example of this internal differentiation is that in 1986 there was a great drought that destroyed most of the staple crops harvest in the left bank. This led the cooperatives from this section to ask for help from the more economically solvent ones from the right bank. The request was rejected under the argument that in the beginning, when they first arrived in the Aguán, they had also suffered a lot (Castro 1994).

As we can see from these two examples, the differentiation between cooperatives was explained through narratives of corruption that were heavily morally charged. I am not arguing that actual pocket picking and embezzlement took place, but it is evident that differentiation was overcharging could be a simple way to pay different prices to ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ cooperatives.” (footnote 34, p. 18)
coming mainly from the forms in which rent was captured within the palm oil industry. I would argue with Turner (2007:126) that “[c]orruption narratives are moral evaluations of the ways in which political power is being administered in society.” Or to phrase it differently, that these narratives of corruption were a way of talking about differentiation and exploitation.

It is now time to move to explore the forms of differentiation that arose within the cooperatives. This differentiation moved along two main axes: gender and age, on the one hand, and in relation to the labor process on the other. Regarding the latter, with the process of production and industrialization of palm oil, the labor and production process went through a process of specialization with a more complex division of labor than the one that can be found for example, in the cultivation of staple crops. This situation had the effect of differentiating among the cooperative members, as some of them began specializing into technical or administrative positions and jobs. This specialization was done mainly through scholarships given by the state to both cooperative members and (mainly) their sons to go and study in state universities. However, the access to these scholarships and positions was mainly predicated upon levels of education and due to their closer location to Tocoa where the higher education centers (better high schools and university) could be found. This meant that most scholarships and the better jobs would go to members of the inside cooperatives. These scholarships and study opportunities included both academic and technical degrees in Honduran universities, as well as shorter study trips. Particularly noteworthy was the journey to Israel to learn of the cooperative system that was being developed there. With this specialization came also differentiation in wages and thus a tendency for some of the cooperative members and their sons to have a form of upper social mobility in COAPALMA (Castro 1994) and later on, especially after the sale of the cooperatives, to search for better paid jobs in the private sector. For example, many of the palm oil technicians hired by the private plantations after the sale of the cooperatives came from this same sector and were trained with public funds.
Another way in which the labor process induced differentiation within the cooperatives was related to the cooperatives’ legal framework. According to the law, all of the members had the possibility or being part of the administration of the cooperative that they formed part of. However, the law also stated that to be a member of the board of directors, you needed to know how to read and write. This meant a particular form of differentiation between base and leadership that was particularly pronounced in outside and staple crops cooperatives, as their members had less access to education. Also, it expressed itself in the crystallization of certain forms of leadership that could, and usually did, translate into practices of bossism, in which a few members could decide what to produce as well as engage in rent capturing practices. The creation and perpetuation of these types of leadership had a very important role to play in the sale of the cooperatives, as we will see later in this chapter.

Regarding the forms of internal differentiation based on gender, it is important to remember Maureen Mackintosh’s (1989b:178) argument that,

No new class emerges undifferentiated, least of all new elements of the working class under capitalism. There are numerous forms of differentiation which emerge as new firms create a workforce in their own image in different parts of the world: differentiation based on skill, on industrial branch, on age, on race, and on gender. Among these, the differentiation based on gender is a fundamental one because it is closely bound up with the organization of reproduction of the class which is in creation.

As I discussed in the last chapter, the process of entering the cooperatives had the effect of rendering invisible women’s labor. First of all, the cooperatives reproduced and reinforced the differentiation between productive (in the fields) and reproductive (at the household) labor and thus, in a way, placed women outside of their purview. Further, since in the cooperatives, and particularly with the shift towards palm oil, families had to rely more and more on the market to acquire their basic goods and nourishment, women’s position within the household became more dependent upon men and their wages. As we will see later in this chapter, this is in part what was at stake for Eugenia in her struggle against the selling of the land and the cows. A
final form of differentiation and exclusion due to gender was inscribed in the agrarian reform law itself. According to this law, the legal title and membership in the cooperatives was exclusively for the head of household. This meant that with the exception of widows and single mothers, women were effectively excluded from direct membership – only 3.8 percent of the beneficiaries were women (Deere and León 2004:191) –, and thus, highly dependent on their male partners. Further, the fact that the agrarian reform legal framework was predicated upon the land to the tiller principle, even if single women were to access membership, they would have to work in the fields, as this was the only legitimate type of labor.

Regarding the differentiation based on age, the children of the members of the cooperatives – other than individual inheritance of the membership – did not have any direct entitlement in the cooperative. For example, in those cases in which the cooperatives had to hire external labor, they tended to give preferential access to their own children. Further, very often the cooperatives did not have the opportunity to include them as members and thus, once they reached working age, they either had to move to another cooperative that had available member spots, look for a job outside of the agricultural sector or work permanently as day laborers. It should then come as no surprise that cooperative members were very invested in the education of their children as a way of both promoting upper social mobility and possible employment outside of the cooperative.

I have shown the ways in which the circulation of capital within the reform sector created a set of frictions and conflicts. These conflicts were predicated upon how capital was injected into the region and how it came to be assembled – in the form of the cooperatives – with labor. Or to phrase it a different way, how surplus was pumped out of the cooperatives’ economy and divided among the different actors involved, including some in the cooperatives themselves. This division was informed not only by the crop grown, but also by the geographical position within the valley and the cooperatives’ political affiliations. Differentiation processes also arose within the cooperatives, due in part to the specialization of the production process, but also to
gender and age positions. All of these different dynamics placed the different individuals involved in particular, and many times antagonistic, relations with the cooperatives; understood as an assemblage of relations between the individuals, their context (both political and economic) and nature, represented here by their relations with the land and crops and activities that were enacted. We will see later in this chapter how these elements came to affect the position of the cooperatives in regard to the sales of the estates.

So far we have treated the reformed sector in the Aguán region as if it operated in a vacuum. This was necessary to show the particular forms in which capital came to interact with labor and nature in the production of the region’s landscape. In the next section, we will to turn to the institutional changes brought by the process of structural adjustment, which opened the door for the sale of the cooperatives.

**Second fold: Structural adjustment and modernization in the countryside**

It must be established from the beginning that the Modernization Law is fundamentally an ‘agrarian count-reform,’ that has as its main purpose to block peasant’s access to land... dismantle the capacity for development of their trade and economic organizations and pass the management of the agrarian conflict, from the Government, to individuals’ decisions. Then, of course, the weaker ones will not have another choice but to get organized, which will lead to an increase in the number of agrarian confrontations.

Juan Ramón Martínez, 1990

By the 1970s the development project that had given the agrarian reform a central place began to show signs of running out of steam. On the one hand, the picture shown by the economic indicators was anything but encouraging, particularly in terms of growth. On the other, as the crisis of the Fordist accumulation regime began to hit home in the global North, a significant part of the costs were transferred to Latin America in the form of what is usually known as the “debt crisis,” whose roots we find in the 1970s, when the development models began to rely more and more on variable interest cheap loans by private banks and consortia. On the other hand, neoliberalism, as an ideological project with a very clear class component (Duménil and
Lévy 2004), was rising as a newly legitimate approach to economics and development policy, enthusiastically endorsed by the IFIs.

These elements together came to create a context in which the role of the state in the economy was profoundly questioned and an alliance of, mainly, industrial and commercial economic groups – who had been born or strengthened at the cost of the state during the 1960s and 1970s – began to push for a set of reforms and to take formal control of the state. This move reflected a set of class interests from within, with economic and political pressures from without (mainly by the IMF and WB); giving as a result what is known as the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP).

The argument behind the SAP was very simple: the increased influence and presence of the state in economic matters had created a set of imbalances that needed to be remedied. To do so, it was important to tackle directly these imbalances, but also to limit the levels of state interference, in order to unshackle the market and allow it to allocate resources in a more optimal manner. Known popularly as “el paquetazo” (the big package that clobbers you) Decree 18-90, which signaled the most notorious, although not the only agreement between the Honduran government and the IFIs, unleashed a set of forces that would deeply transform Honduran society.

Regarding the need to balance national financial indicators (mainly the budget deficit, balance of payments and inflation), the SAP revoked customs import duties in order to accelerate trade and economic liberalization. At the same time, through the devaluation of the Lempira, it attempted to stimulate exports and take advantage of Honduras’s “competitive advantages” (mainly, cheap labor and natural resources, including land.). The SAP also eliminated state subsidies to the economy, abandoned the control of prices for the internal market, and promoted the privatization of national companies in strategic sectors such as telecommunications.
In practice, these “adjustments” were experienced as shocks that rocked the entire social fabric of the country. Not all sectors were affected the same way, of course. On the side of the “losers,” we had mainly the already fragile and small middle class, as well as the urban and rural poor who experienced increasing levels of unemployment and (massive) underemployment, including the loss of around 2,000 public-sector jobs; reduction of real wages and ability to consume; inflation and an increase in the cost of living and public services; and a redirection and increase in the price of credit, due to modifications in the rate of interest (Barahona 2005).

In terms of the economic power groups, the biggest loser of this process was the cattle ranching elite – that traditionally had been an important part of the hegemonic fractions – and those sectors, mainly of organized or independent peasants, that produced for the internal market. On the other side of the road, the biggest “winners” of the SAP were the exporters, particularly the garment sector (maquila), as well as the domestic monopolies and oligopolies (mainly foodstuffs), and the banking sector.

In general, it would appear that Cáceres and Zelaya (2011:5) are right when they argue that “between 1990 and 2009, and under the shelter of the [currency] devaluation, the liberalization of the prices of goods and services (or the lack of governmental control over prices) and the privatization of state services, the Honduran entrepreneurial elite enriched itself very acutely and actively, at the cost of the social rights of the population.”

Probably one of the most affected sectors was the agriculture. Although the developmentalist period had translated into a process of constant urbanization of the national population, the rural sector continued to be important in terms of production and employment. However, with the SAP came an increasing focus on export-oriented crops, to the detriment of staple crop production for the internal market; as well as the liberalization of imports that translated into Honduras becoming a net importer of staple crops (white and yellow maize, sorghum and rice) (Rueda-Junquera 1998).
In practice the agrarian aspect of the SAP took shape in the form of two bills: the Land Titling Program (LTP) from 1982, and the Agricultural Sector Modernization and Development Law (LMA) of 1992. The LTP project – mainly bankrolled by the USAID (over $20 million) budget (Jansen and Roquas 1998) – responded in part to the escalation of the agrarian conflict in the country towards the end of the 1970s and the open defiance and opposition of the FENAGH against the agrarian policy (Jansen and Roquas 1998). The main objective of the LTP was to allocate land more efficiently to producers, thus opening up access to credit and technical assistance. Also, the granting of legal property rights was to become the cornerstone for the creation of a land market (Salgado 1994). In practice, what the LTP did was increase the price of land, thus making it harder for land poor and landless families to have access. Also, although it was oriented towards those sectors not included within the scope of the agrarian reform, by granting full and individual title to occupants of national and ejido lands, it weakened the peasant movement and brought into the market lands that used to be outside its scope. Further, by allowing the titling of farms between 0.1 and 10 hectares, it legitimated smallholding [minifundio] (Salgado 1994).

Jansen and Roquas (1998) describe how the implementation of the LTP came to create new conflicts over land, as “formal” and “informal” property claims clashed. Also, in a vein similar to Michael Mann’s (1984) infrastructural power, the LTP allowed the state agrarian institutions to penetrate the rural communities and gain more control of who had access to what. According to these authors, one of the effects of this was the increasing perception that the state was only the judiciary and its presence was only felt as an enforcer of property rights. As Vinay Gidwani (2008a:87) has argued for the Indian case regarding the expansion of the state under the development imperative, “…dispersion and proliferation of the state apparatus had an electric political effect, producing disagreements and conflicts wherever it came into contact with society.”
The LMA came to be known as the Norton Law, because of the active participation in the drafting process of U.S. economist Roger Norton. In formal terms, the LMA did not abolish the agrarian reform, but merely modified provisions for titling land, selecting beneficiaries and defining the obligations of the state. The Law was the agrarian equivalent of the SAP and operationalized changes to the sector such as those mentioned above. However, its influence was nowhere felt harder than in the area of agrarian reform and land tenure. The Law assumed that without clear property rights and tenure security, there could be no investment and thus no economic growth or job creation. The LMA came to transform dramatically much of the agrarian reform framework that had been in place since 1972. The causes for acquiring land for redistribution were reduced to two: being over the private land ceilings or having been idle for the last consecutive 18 months. Also, tenure security over land was expanded. For example, national and ejido lands sold to private individuals had to be titled within six months. Further, small farms could be titled, regardless of their size. When the INA would now assign land to beneficiaries it would be in the form of a title with a mortgage lien and individual plots could be titled as part of the land distributed. Also, cooperatives could title their land and the indivisibility of their property was abolished so that cooperative lands could be divided into individual plots.

According to Esther Roquas (2002) another important change was the abolition of the “land to the tiller” principle that had been present in both the 1962 and 1975 agrarian reform laws. This allowed for the separation of ownership from working on the land, as now, according to article 64, land had to be only “adequately exploited.” Further, the definition of a smallholding was reduced from ten hectares to one hectare (Pino, Thorpe, and Corea 1992).

Finally, women were, for the first time, accorded all the rights of other agrarian reform beneficiaries. However,

Feminist organisations considered the abolition of discriminating criteria in the Law of Modernisation to be an important step because it embodied a political
decision to do something for rural women. On the other hand, they argued that the state did not provide the necessary conditions to make women able to be 'competitive and efficient', as the law stipulated, such as relieving them of the burden of reproductive work or changing gender constraints. The female president of COCOCH pointed out that women will never be able to work in agriculture on a full-time base (a legal requirement for becoming beneficiary of the law) because of their housekeeping duties. She considered that women thus do not qualify to obtain land from the state through the arrangements of the Law of Modernisation. (Roquas 2002:178)

What this meant is that Honduran agrarian law went from being clearly tilted in favor of men, to gender neutral, which in practice had a similar effect. Women were not excluded in the letter of the law, but by not actively trying to correct existing gender biases, it left the results to the actual application of the law and in these terms women continued to get the shorter end of the stick.

The combined effect of the LTP and the LMA was a massive concentration of land in the hands of a small number of Honduran (male) landowners and foreign banana companies. The effect on the reform sector was massive. According to the Coordinating Council of Honduran Peasant Organizations (COCOCH), one of the most important peasant organizations in the 1990s, in the period between 1990 and 1994, of a total of 56,587 hectares that were originally distributed through the agrarian reform, 30,587 – that is, 53.6 percent – were sold (2010: 24). Nowhere was the impact of this process more strongly felt than in the Aguán and the palm oil industry was the most important actor involved. Before turning our attention to the process of land sales in the Aguán, it is important to take first a detour, and describe the process by which palm oil became a global commodity.

**Third fold: Palm oil's rise as a global commodity**

The first modern or colonial encounter with palm oil was in the mid-seventeenth century, when Portuguese explorers mention its use for food preparation in West Africa, close to the coasts of what is now Nigeria and Liberia. It is clear that initially its use and production was largely centered on Africa and that it would not be until the 1830s that large-scale international commerce in palm oil began with the deliberate encouragement of the British government.
There is a deep connection between the decline of the African slave trade and the rise of the palm oil as an international commodity. As the slave trade became riskier, merchants continued the search for more profitable and stable venture, such as palm oil. The development of this commerce was so significant that eventually the area between the Benin and Calabar Rivers, came to be known as the Oil Rivers (Corley and Tinker 2008:4).

If the birthplace of the industry is to be found in West Africa, its development as a plantation and industrial crop would begin in Southeast Asia. According to legend, the African oil palm was introduced to Asia from Mauritius and Amsterdam in the form of four seedlings, which were planted in botanical gardens in Indonesia (Kongsager and Reenberg 2012). The first large plantations were created in Sumatra in 1911 and in Malaya in 1917. Initially the Sumatra sector grew faster than the Malayan one. However, the Japanese occupation of this region during World War II set back the whole industry and it would only be in the post-war period that Malaysia (the former British Colony of Malaya) and later Indonesia would come to dominate the industry (Corley and Tinker 2008).

Since its take off in the 1960s, production and trade in palm oil has increased constantly. In terms of production, it has gone from 1.5 million Metric tons (Mt) in 1961, to over 30 million Mt in 2009, which represents an average annual growth rate of 7 percent. This increase has meant that in the last few years, palm oil has surpassed soybean oil as the world’s primary vegetable oil (Teoh 2010) and accounts for around 32 percent of global vegetable oil production. Since the 1980s Asia has become the geographical center of the industry, accounting for 88 percent of total production, with Indonesia (46 percent) and Malaysia (39 percent) in the lead (Kongsager and Reenberg 2012).

In terms of the production process, palm oil combines three elements that must be taken into account. First, it has a relatively long initial period before it goes into full production. The whole process is divided into four different stages: (1) a nursery period of around 12 months, before it can be transplanted to the field; (2) after two to two and one-half years, the oil palm
begins to yield fruit; (3) more oil can be extracted from the fruit when it is fresh, thus it must be transported to the mill in less than 24 hours; and (4) the oil is extracted from the fruit in the mill and is ready for different industrial uses. Due to this long idle initial period and the necessity of siting mills close to the plantations, palm production requires significant initial investments in fixed capital (Kongsager and Reenberg 2012; Carrere 2006).

Second, palm oil production, particularly in the stage of harvesting, has proven resistant to mechanization. The competitive advantages in the industry thus rest almost solely on the price of labor. Most of the growth in the production of the crop has been achieved through an increase in the area planted rather than through yield improvements. This situation has tended to segment the global market into two main camps. On the one hand, Malaysia and Indonesia account for almost all of the world’s exports (over 90 percent of the total). In other parts of the world, such as Latin America and Africa, most of production is aimed at either domestic or regional markets (Corley and Tinker 2008). Also, it is important to emphasize that palm oil production is located solely in “developing countries in the humid tropics” (Teoh 2010:2).

Third, one of the reasons for the success of the palm oil industry has to do with its versatility and multiple uses. From foodstuff to industrial lubricants, palm oil can be found all around us in everyday life, and although it is mainly used as an ingredient in the manufacture and further processing of food products, other potential uses are being developed. Probably the most controversial of these other uses has been agrofuels, particularly biodiesel. It is hard to figure out how much of the global palm oil production is going into the production of fuels. However, when we look at the amount of palm oil used for non-food purposes, we find that in the 12-year period between 1998 and 2010, it increased 450 percent to represent around 27 percent of total production (Kongsager and Reenberg 2012). This is not the place to develop a

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58 According to Cheng Hai Teoh (2010:4), palm oil “…can be found in more than 50 percent of the packaged products in supermarkets, ranging from cooking oils, margarine, ice cream, cookies and chocolates to soaps, detergents and cosmetics.”
fully fleshed out analysis of the agrofuel industry (see, Colchester and Chao 2013; Carrere 2006; Fortin 2011; White and White 2012; Searchinger and Heimlich n.d.). However, there is a clear linkage between the food and non-food uses of palm oil, as “in recent years, due to the demand for biodiesel, the prices of vegetable oils have become linked to those of mineral oil” (Kongsager and Reenberg 2012:14). Palm oil has become the quintessential “flex crop,” that is, a crop with multiple and flexible uses, pointing towards the “…interconnection between and implications of the restructuring of agrofood, feed, and fuel complexes.” (Borras et al. 2012:846).

Taken together, these three elements give some particular characteristics to the palm oil industry. First, due to its flexibility and increasing demand – related to its leading position regarding vegetable production – it has become a very profitable activity. Second, due to its needs in terms of fixed capital (production and transport infrastructure), and the long waiting period before receiving significant returns, the palm oil industry is highly capital intensive.59 Further, the necessary geographical concentration of the industry – as mills must be close to the plantations – makes it particularly susceptible to vertical integration. Finally, since its competitive edge is linked to the price of labor power, it must strive towards the capture of cheap labor, as well as the promotion and enforcement of particular forms of production that rely heavily on time-discipline and work intensification.

To summarize, then, the palm oil industry needs large amount of initial investment and a particular sort of institutional environment and forms of regulation that promote vertical integration and the capture of cheap labor. This situation places two actors in the middle of the palm oil assemblage. On the one hand the state, in its role as a mediating actor between scales and enforcer of regulatory norms (Grundmann and Darnhofer 2010; Borras, McMichael, and Scoones 2010). On the other, it is the IFIs, international banks and transnational companies

59 According to information from the transnational corporation Unilever, in 1988 the cost of establishing a 10,000-hectare oil palm plantation was approximately $75 million (RAFI 1988:8).
that can mobilize the financial capital necessary to jump start this sort of activity (Carrere 2006).

All of these elements come forward in a particularly salient manner in the ways in which the development question is approached. Thus, for the particular case of the palm oil industry, since the 1960s, both the World Bank and the IADB have injected millions of dollars into the creation of the necessary conditions for its development (public infrastructure, mills, seeds, etc.). According to Tanya Kerssen,

Most of the projects were implemented in the public sector in the 1970s. These were of a more classic “development” orientation, focused on building state capacity through the construction of processing plants, mills, roads, extension services and credit facilities to develop smallholder farms and in some cases outgrower schemes (contract farming). But when public sector financing for agriculture decreased to a trickle in the 1980s and 90s, the Bank’s private sector lending arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), began ramping up investment to agro-export projects. IFC funding targeted much larger operations and moved down into the palm oil supply chain, with substantial investments in trading, refining and manufacturing. (2013:54–55)

In plain words, during the developmentalist period, the support from IFIs was directed at supporting and promoting state-driven development projects, such as the BAP in Honduras. However, with the rise and consolidation of the neoliberal strategy from the 1980s onwards, the policy emphasis shifted and aimed at transferring those assets and the surpluses produced from the public to the private sector. As Rob Cramb suggests, “the surge in profitability of plantation crops has thus created opportunities for political elites at various levels (national, state, and local) to plunder these once-marginal but now valuable land resources” (Cramb 2011:275).

60 Since 1965, the WB has committed around $1 billion to over 35 palm oil projects around the world, with about half of the projects located in Indonesia (Teoh 2010:11).
**Honduras in the palm oil assemblage**

“Ode to the African Palm”
You came when we least needed you
and remained longer than we expected.
You displaced the ancestral kapok tree that used to
rise upon my fields
and shook off the maize that filled my
plains...
Oh, African palm!
neither white, nor black...
red and bloodied.
You are not from the Aguán
neither of the peasants
nor from Honduras or Central America.
You are of the looters that ruin us,
of Facussé and his killers.
— Chaco de la Pitoreta (2012:67)

For the particular case of Central America, according to Richardson (1995:1), the early history of
the oil palm industry is deeply intertwined with the history of the United Fruit Company. The
first African palm seeds are said to have arrived in Honduras in either 1927 or 1929 via the
banana company. These first seeds came from different genetic lines (from Sumatra, Sierra
Leone, Belgian Congo and Malaya) and were planted in the Lacetilla botanical garden, just
outside the city of Tela, on the north coast (Umaña 1998). It is unclear whether these first oil
palm samples were brought to Honduras for ornamental purposes, as an alternative to the
Panama disease-riddled banana plantations, or as a possible way of diversifying production,
one of the company’s dreams since the early years (Richardson 1995). Based on the results of experiments with these first samples, in the late 1930s the first commercial palm oil plantations were developed by Pedro and Arturo García in the hacienda Birichiche in El Progreso, Yoro Department, in northern Honduras. From there, similar projects began in San Alejo, also in the Honduran North Coast, Quepos (Costa Rica) and Tiquisate (Guatemala) (TechnoServe 2009; Umaña 1998).

By the 1960s, these first experiments had showed that palm oil was a viable option for UFCO. From 1962 onwards, the Company’s strategy included a much firmer commitment to the development of its palm oil sector. For example, in 1965, UFCO acquired the vegetable oil processing and sales organization, Numar, thus vertically integrating its vegetable oil enterprise. Also, in 1967 the Company established its first oil processing facility in Honduras and in 1969 it purchased the Nicaraguan Compañía Aceitera Corona (Richardson 1995). This was also a decade of expansion of the area planted with oil palm in the UFCO-promoted plantations.

It seems like a striking coincidence that just as the industry was starting to show signs of being a successful business, the BAP was formed with the idea of increasing palm oil production by creating a group of peasant cooperatives. Further, it is important to note that similar smallholder palm oil projects were being promoted in countries such as Costa Rica and Malaysia, where in late 1958, the newly independent government created the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA). This scheme was so successful that by 1985, FELDA accounted for 32 percent of the area planted in Malaysia and around 25 percent of the total production of that country’s oil (Corley and Tinker 2008). 61

This connection between UFCO’s interest in palm, the Honduran state’s proposed development projects and the IADB’s agreement to bankroll these, begs for a better analysis that I can provide at this moment. For my interests, it suffices to say that just as the global palm oil

61 See (Robertson 1984) for an in-depth case study of the early FELDA experience.
industry was beginning to gain some steam in the 1970s, it also became a viable business option in Honduras. Initially, due to the conditions of both the local elites and the particular needs of the industry outlined above, the only way in which it could take hold and develop was through this particular articulation between the BAP as an expression of an aspiring developmental state, UFCO’s commercial interests in the emerging market, and the IADB’s willingness to bankroll the project. Let’s explore this articulation.

One of the reasons that the development of the palm oil industry began to take off in the 1960s is the reframing of the relationship between population growth, technology and development that was taking place among the international agencies. According to a FAO (1992:n.p.) report on the organization’s involvement in the world,

In 1960, the world's population reached three billion. For the first time in human history, global population had increased by one billion people in a mere thirty years: it was the start of the so-called 'population explosion'. Food problems could not be solved simply by the distribution of surpluses which had accumulated in industrialized countries in the 1950s: they now required that food production be stepped up in the countries where it was most needed. It was obvious that solutions would not materialize solely through providing information and advice, but that support had to be provided in the field in order to promote and hasten agricultural development at country level.

Further,

In 1964 the Organization and the World Bank jointly created a cooperative programme through which FAO could assist Member Nations in the identification and preparation of agricultural development projects suitable for World Bank financing. From being mainly an advisory body, FAO had become an operational organization, assisting countries to prepare overall development plans, helping to execute major projects and helping countries to obtain finance for national development.

In this context, in Honduras in the 1960s palm oil was promoted as not only a way of correcting the national deficit in edible oil production, but also as a way of promoting local industry and thus moving in the direction of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) (Jimenez 1992). The promotion of the palm oil industry could thus be seen as central to the
Honduran developmentalist project, as it connected industrial development in the countryside with industrial development in the cities.

The oil palm industry in Honduras: the case of Miguel Facussé

It is useful to introduce here the story of Miguel Facussé and his Dinant Corporation, as a way of exemplifying the connections between the development of the palm oil industry, the state and the local elites. The story of Facussé’s rise to being one of the richest persons in Honduras is an illuminating one; it is also deeply intertwined with the development of the palm oil industry.

The son of Palestinian immigrants, with an entrepreneurial tradition that produced much success in the garment industry (both for exports and domestic retail), Facussé founded the Corporación Cressida in the early 1970s, dedicated to the manufacturing and commercialization of light industrial products, ranging from prepared foodstuff to detergents and soaps. Part of Cressida was a small soaps and detergents plant known as Químicas Dinant, founded with $7 million in loans from Bank of America and Lloyds Bank International. To be able to access these funds, the National Investments Corporation (CONADI) served as guarantor for the international banks.

By the 1980s, Dinant had grown from a small plant to a much larger corporation dedicated to the production of foodstuffs, detergents and soaps; palm oil was a crucial raw material for its production. At the time, most of the palm oil came from the reform sector mills, such as COAPALMA. Attracted by the profits that he saw could be made by moving down and controlling more of the production chain, Facussé began building a competing extraction plant in the Aguán.

62 This section is based on (Anonymous n.d.; Cáceres and Zelaya 2011)

63 Created in 1974 by Oswaldo López Arellano’s government, the CONADI’s objective was to attract and promote industrial investment in the country. Among CONADI’s functions, was to serve as guarantor in cases where local entrepreneurs needed external financing from international banks.
But the State, under pressure from Coapalma, revoked Facussé’s building permit for the Aguán, and he had to build halfway between the Sula and the Aguán valleys. Facussé claims that Coapalma used its profits to influence the government, and alternately bribe and threaten cooperatives into signing a petition against his plant. (De Fontenay 1999:11)

This first failure did not deter Facussé, but it was clear that changes in institutions would be needed for his business to grow. It is around the 1980s that Facussé joined the Honduran Progress Association (APROH). APROH was made up of businessmen and army officers – including the infamous General Gustavo Álvarez Martínez64 – who were interested in opening the country’s economy and profiting in the process.65 This Association was the political brains and muscle behind the rise of neoliberalism in the country. One of its main objectives was to direct the transition from military to civilian governments that began in 1982 with the declaration of a new constitution and the election of Roberto Suazo Córdoba as President.

During Suazo Córdoba’s government, Facussé served as presidential economic counselor. One of his recommendations was that the country should strengthen its economy by limiting foreign capital and currency drain and that the foreign debt that many of the local companies assumed under the mantle of CONADI and other public corporations, which had them on the brink of bankruptcy, should be converted into internal debt. Once this was done, the government could recover the money spent paying off these debts by selling the assets of the recovered companies to the local private sector. In the case of CONADI, these debts rose to around $2.5 billion. After

64 Álvarez Martínez was one of the founders of the infamous 3-16 Battalion. Using techniques similar to those of the Argentinian death squads, and advised by Argentinian officers, the 3-16 was created in 1981 as a counterinsurgency elite unit and was responsible for the disappearances and killings of over 200 people during the 1980s (CONADEH 2002).

65 It is also important to point out that the APROH had a clear and quite explicit anti-communist agenda. According to the Honduran political scientist Ernesto Paz (1984:19) in the mid-1980s, “[t]he number one priority of the APROH is the fight against communism, which is why it is allied with similar organization in the country, as well as CAUSA International, an organization linked to the Unification Church led by reverend [Sun Myung] Moon, and lately, the Cuban-American Foundation.”
buying off these debts, CONADI held assets distributed among 68 companies, including Facussé’s Químicas Dinant.

This process of privatization was formalized through a set of public auctions in 1986 and 1988. However, from the perspective of the state they were a failure, as the companies’ assets were sold at prices below their real values and in some cases promissory notes were accepted. Who never complained about the way in which this unfolded was Facussé. And how could he?

After a complex process of negotiations both above and under the table, he managed to maintain control over his companies and to not pay off a penny of the debts he acquired. By 1993 he had a presence in all of Central America as owner of the firms that distributed the brands Colgate-Palmolive and Maseca (processed maize for tortillas), among others, which were then grouped under Corporación Cressida. In 1994 Facussé sold his regional patents to the international corporation Colgate-Palmolive for $40 million and in 2000 he sold Cressida to the transnational company Unilever for $323 million, keeping only Dinant Corporation under his direct control.

With the money accrued from these moves, and the legal changes implemented by the LMA, Facussé and his Dinant Corporation now had the chance to return to the Aguán, acquire lands and deepen the vertical integration of his palm oil enterprise.

Explaining the birth of the capital of the agrarian counter-reform

Once it began, it spread like wildfire. After Isletas sold its lands to the Standard Fruit Company on May 5, 1990, the transfer of agrarian reform lands to a handful of Honduran landowners and transnational companies began to spread like a plague. As the process of structural adjustment – mainly in the form of the LMA – opened up the legal floodgates, money, devalued by the same process of structural adjustment, began to flow into the Honduran countryside in search of profits and cheap assets. In a context framed by a reform sector lacking production incentives, heavily indebted and with little or no support from the state institutions, there were plenty of
willing sellers and cheap lands to be found; and when they were not found, they could be manufactured through bribery, threats, deceit and blood.

There is not an exact measure of just how much land was alienated. According to what I would consider a low estimate, more than half of the over 56,000 hectares that were distributed during the agrarian reform period were “legally sold” between 1990 and 1994; the number rises to almost 74 percent in the case of the Aguán (COCOCH 2010:24). A different study calculates that in the period between when the first cooperative was sold in the Aguán (Buenos Amigos, July, 1991) and 1997, 28,806.7 hectares had been alienated (Macías 2001:206–208).66

According to the prevailing narrative, the main forces behind the process of dispossession were the “foreign” large landowners Miguel Facussé, Reinaldo Canales and René Morales. In formal terms, their foreignness is disputable.67 However, more important for my argument is the fact that this narrative places the full brunt of the process of dispossession outside and above the Aguán. Outside of the Aguán, because by claiming that this was done by foreigners, it was possible to mobilize a nationalist discourse that articulated easily with what I have called in Chapter 1 the myth of the rich but impoverished nation. In this case the nation’s wealth takes the form of the fertile lands of the Aguán, which cannot be enjoyed by Hondurans, because foreigners – Miguel Facussé, Reinaldo Canales and René Morales – have hoarded them.

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66 There is a clear discrepancy between the numbers presented between Macías and COCOCH. This number of 28,806.7 hectares is larger than the amount of land that according to COCOCH was distributed in total in the Aguán (28,365 hectares). The discrepancy probably has to do with the way in which the Aguán region is understood, as sometimes only the Bajo or lower Aguán is included, while in other moments, the whole Valley of the river basin is included.

67 In the case of Facussé, whose story we recounted above, these claims are based on his Palestinian ancestry, although his family has been living in Honduras for over a century (González 1992:191). In the case of Morales, he was born in Nicaragua, but moved to Honduras 1979 and since then acquired Honduran nationality. His brother Jaime Morales also lived in Honduras between 1979 and 1996 and was Daniel Ortega’s vice president in Nicaragua from 2007 to 2012. Finally, Canales’ history is harder to track, but he is often identified as of Salvadoran descent.
Above the Aguán, because placing the full blame for the land sales at the feet of these men and the state effaces the internal complexities, tensions and conflicts that were already in place in the region before the actual sales even began. Further, this narrative reproduces the idea of the state as some sort of monolithic, almighty entity acting and preying upon the communities. I want be clear, my aim here is not to take the responsibility away from these businessmen or from state institutions; as we will see next, these large landowners were certainly the biggest winners of the dispossession cycle, with the public institutions as either spectators or enablers of the process. Further, as we saw above, Facussé had a central role to play in promoting the structural adjustment plan and creating the conditions that made possible the privatization of the palm oil industry through his maneuvering with and over the CONADI.

According to Macías (2001:94), the three bigger buyers of agrarian reform lands were Facussé (who acquired 34 percent of the land sold), Morales (23 percent) and the Standard Fruit Company (8 percent). This data is probably an underestimate, as in many cases the larger purchasers would also use surrogate buyers or would buy from people who had bought first. This would seem to corroborate the idea of the big foreign buyers. However, the reality is not that simple. In their study on the sale process on a national scale, Ruben and Funez (1993) locate three main sectors in the early moments of the land sales: Isletas-Ilanga-Rigores (left bank), Saba-Olanchito (middle to upper Aguán basin), and Corocito-Dos Bocas (from the plains to the mouth of the Aguán River). It is noteworthy that these three sectors are outside the immediate scope of the BAP zone and contain those cooperatives that I located as either outsider or staple crops cooperatives. It is also important to take into account that the first cooperative that they mention as being sold, the 9 de Noviembre, was purchased by members of the army. In fact, for the Corocito-Dos Bocas sector, most of the buyers were politicians (members of the national Congress), members of the armed forces or former members of the board of directors of COAPALMA. According to these authors, most of the acquisitions studied
were done in an irregular manner and at very low prices. In most cases, the cooperatives that were sold cultivated staple crops.

Although Ruben and Funez’s study accounts only for the initial moment of the sales process, it is illuminating in several regards. First, in the beginning, the patterns of cooperative sales overlap with the differentiations among the cooperatives that I mentioned before; the first cooperatives to sell were the outsider and staple crops cooperatives. Second, once the legal restrictions on reform sector land sales were eliminated, the ability of individuals to capture rents through COAPALMA translated into a deepening of the differentiations within the reform sector, as the sale of cooperatives to former members of the board of directors of COAPALMA so crudely illustrates. Third, certain local actors managed to mobilize and use particular forms of state power to facilitate the processes of dispossession. Since most of these actors were connected to state institutions, such as the national congress and the armed forces, it would appear that the possibility of mediating between scales – the regional and the national in this case – opened up a space for primitive accumulation. It is commonly believed in the Aguán that many army colonels “received” lands as payment for their help in the process of dispossession, which, if accurate, only seems to validate this argument. Fourth, it should be clear from the previous points that the land selling process was not only legitimized by state institutions, but also enabled by them in multiple other ways.

Other studies of the land sales in the Aguán (Macías 2001; Castro 1994) seem to agree with these arguments, including the larger incidence of sales in the left bank and the staple crops cooperatives. However, they also present another line of argument: although there were high levels of repression and violence in forcing reluctant cooperatives to sell, it is also true that many of the sales were done willingly or at least in a peaceful manner. According to this argument, there were both external and internal reasons for the sales. Among the external reasons, we find, first of all, the passing of the LMA, which allowed the sale of cooperative lands. Second, many cooperatives were highly indebted and thus were forced to sell the land to pay off
their debts and make at least some profit in the process. Third, there was an attack from the private sector and the government itself, claiming that since the cooperatives were so indebted and the production of palm oil was no longer profitable – due to a drop in international prices in early 1990s –, that the reform sector had been a failure and that it was time to let the market take over. Finally, since the cooperatives had received so little financial and technical support from the state and since most of the peasant families had remained deeply impoverished no matter how much work they had put into the cooperatives, there was a very limited sense of “ownership” by the members. Thus when the chance came to make a quick buck on land that was seen as worthless, most cooperatives decided to pull the trigger.

Regarding the internal reasons for the sales, the argument was much more straightforward. The cooperatives that sold did it because they were not organizationally strong enough, there was lack of unity and their members were not sufficiently politically conscious to understand that land was more than a simple asset. The reasons for these organizational weaknesses ranged from lack of internal political education by the members, lack of organizational and political education by the agrarian reform institutions, the inherited sense of individualism and the Honduran peasantry’s historical difficulties with collective labor; argument that in general could be extended to most peasantries on the world (see for example, Wolf 1969; Fabricant 2010).

From this narrative follows its opposite: why some of the cooperatives did not sell. Here the main reasons given are the higher education levels of their members – as members of La Norteña explained to me when I posed the question –, the higher levels of unity and organizational experience, as in the case of La Salamá,68 or the fact that some cooperatives had

68 The case of La Salamá cooperative is usually given as an example of how successful the reform sector could be. Before the 1970s and the beginning of the BAP, Salamá members had been organized by a Spanish priest into a collective production cooperative, so by the time the cooperatives began to be formed, they had a head start. This particularity is usually cited to explain why they did not sell. However,
been created by former workers of the banana companies, and – because they were composed of proletarians — were no longer burdened by peasant individualism. According to this narrative, with the sales those that had it tough were the ones that did not sell, because they had to suffer through the decrease in palm oil prices in the 1990s, while the members of the cooperatives that sold were happy enjoying the money that they had received. As we can see, most of the blame is placed here on the inability of some of the cooperatives to fully evolve and leave aside their Honduran peasantness and become modern, organized and disciplined.69

Also, this sort of narrative effaces the regional internal differentiations and tensions that existed within the valley and among the reform sector. Such narratives are good at explaining and framing the general process of the sales. However, they are not very good at explaining the patterns of the sales. Allow me to explain. In his study on the land sales in the Aguán, Macías (2001) goes into some depth regarding the sale of the San Isidro cooperative to Facussé for over $900,000 in February, 1994. Regarding the reasons for the sale, Macías mentions that former members of the cooperative told him that

Internally, they emphasize that the main problems were the deficient pay (many times it was not enough to cover basic expenses), the precarious conditions of some groups and administrative corruption. Also, COAPALAMA paid low prices

69 This reasoning goes against some of the literature on the topic – with the important exceptions of Chayanov (1966; Bernstein 2009) and van der Ploeg (2010) – that see cooperatives as going through a cycle that inevitable leads either to a transformation more along the line of a firm or disintegration (Cook 1995). According to this, the only way in which cooperatives can survive over time is if there is a strong sense of “member commitment,” which refers to the set of extra-economic incentives and sense of belonging that the cooperative can provide to its members (see for example, Österberg and Nilsson 2009; Bhuyan 2007). Thus, selling, rather than remaining as cooperatives, should be seen as the norm and not the other way around.
per ton of fruit. To these internal elements, external causes must be added, such as the promulgation of anti-reform laws. (p. 96)

In this same line, one of the cooperative members also told him that

Our cooperative did not have any standing debts with anyone. The main reason [to sell] was to stop being enslaved by a few who never went to weed the oil palm plantation or cut down the fruit, but who are the ones getting richer as a result of corruption, and that we could not take it anymore. (p.97)

Although there were no debts, there was a feeling that the cooperative was not a fruitful endeavor due mainly to elite capture. Income was limited and tended to concentrate in the hands of a few who could extract rent (corruption). Also, there was a feeling that not all of all associates worked as much as everyone else and that COAPALMA was also extracting rent from them. Actually, this complicated relationship with COAPALMA was the starting point of the sale. About four months before the actual sale, the members of the San Isidro Cooperative began to explore the possibility of leaving COAPALMA and selling their fruit to another extracting plant. However, once the board of directors started to visit extracting mills outside the Aguán to explore this possibility, they were constantly told that they could not buy fruit from the San Isidro cooperative, because there was an agreement with COAPALMA (De Fontenay 1999:17).

In this search for an alternative buyer, they visited Miguel Facussé’s extraction mill. He gave them the same answer, but mentioned that what he could do was to buy their assets and land. The board of directors discussed the matter and decided to sell. Once the decision was taken,

70 She mentions that: “Coapalma may also have protected its market from competition by blocking producers from leaving the Aguán, an extreme form of entry-deterrence. Several politically influential cooperatives did in fact leave Coapalma, giving up their share in its assets and any future profits. But other, less powerful groups claim to have encountered difficulties when they tried to exit. The one paved road connecting the Aguán to the Sula valley and the rest of the country is guarded by a military checkpoint; all such checkpoints have been repeatedly criticized for extracting bribes from truckers to allow passage... The Aguán checkpoint was accused of barring exit from the Aguán by all but the above-mentioned influential groups on behalf of Coapalma.”
they organized a general assembly with the rest of the members of the cooperative and informed them that they were going to sell.

Macías’ interpretation is noteworthy. For him, this is a clear example of how a few members – the board of directors – decided to negotiate under the table and sell the cooperative without informing the membership. He also questions why they decided to sell to external capital – Facussé – rather than to local investors. According to him:

It is curious that most of the groups [cooperatives] that disintegrated opted to offer their assets to external investors and not to local groups that had shown interest. Examples include the Salamá and Guapinol cooperatives. Both tried to buy from some groups, but these opted to sell to someone from outside, rather than to someone from home. (2001:100)

For him, the explanation for this behavior was corruption, as the members of the sale negotiating committee accepted having received over $110 stipends from Facussé during the process. I did not find anything in the published accounts, nor in my own conversations with former cooperative members, to contradict this interpretation. In fact, in those cases where the board of directors or particular members – as we will see soon – refused to sign and sell, death threats and even assassinations were used to force the deals. However, this interpretation renders invisible several elements. It paints a picture of pervasive corruption in which the San Isidro cooperative, in response to COAPALMA corruption, falls for Facussé’s trickery and decides to sell the land.

Other interpretations are also possible. For example, that the motivation behind the sale was to break out of the control that COAPALMA – seen from the perspective of the cooperative members as an external actor – had over them, as they could not sell their production to the higher bidder. Here, selling could be interpreted as a way of retaining some sort of autonomy and going against COAPALMA’s enclosure. We could also read the process along the lines of social differentiation and rent capture already mentioned in this chapter, but also as another example of the intensity with which the Honduran peasantry resists the idea of working for
others. Ironically, we can see here a similar situation to the one described in relation to the strike of 1981.

As I showed before, the expansion of the palm oil industry during the developmentalist period in the Aguán had created a set of contradictions and conflicts that ran along three axes (reform sector-state; among the cooperative; within the cooperatives). These contradictions created various forms of differentiation and positioned the different individuals and groups in particular positions in regards to both the cooperatives and the palm oil industry in general. Once the LMA lifted the restriction on selling reform sector lands, vast amounts of capital entered the region and circulated within and among the cracks left by the previous processes of differentiation. This capital, as in the case of Facussé, was amassed through pillaging the state, but was also typical of the way in which industrial capital was amassed in the country (light agroindustry based on raw materials such as palm oil). Without it being a mathematical rule, it is clear that what I have been calling outsider and staple crops cooperatives had a greater tendency to sell their land and assets than the insider ones, which had access to the points of rent capture (processing and above all COAPALMA) and social capital (education above all). This is in part why many cooperatives preferred to sell to external investors than to local ones; not only were stipends distributed and skulls crushed, but the wounds from disputes between the different cooperatives were still very raw.

The particular rhythms of the global palm oil ensemble also had their say in the matter. As we can see in figure 1, the period of the BAP, from its beginning in the early 1970s to its closing in the mid-1990s, is framed by two cycles in the international prices of palm oil. The first cycle is one of growth and instability, until it peaks in 1984. From there, a new cycle begins, in which prices maintain their instability, but remain lower. The down cycle coincides with the transfer of COAPALMA´s control to the cooperatives, the withdrawal of the INA´s support to the cooperatives and what most cooperative members remember as a very hard time, with little
profits. This of course placed the cooperatives in a very vulnerable situation, which was
deepened by COAPALMA’s profit squeeze (high rent capture with low prices).

For investors such as Facussé, this down cycle was a blessing in disguise. Since he had
sold his companies in dollars, he was able to take advantage of the double devaluation that was
taking place in Honduras. First of all, due to the SAPs, the Lempira had been deeply devalued
and there was rampant inflation. This meant that he could buy land in the Aguán at low prices.
Second, part of the offensive against the reform sector by the neoliberal governments was to
devalue the work that they had done and to ask them to lay back and let the market take over.71
Finally, since for Facussé and others, the buying of the plantations meant strengthening their
process of vertical integration, they could not only absorb losses for a while, but could also make
up what they lost from the low prices of palm oil through their control of other parts of the
processing process. From this perspective, the sale process could be seen as the effects of the
However, it is important to remember that this was not the case of capitalist firms competing
among each other, but of large and subsidized capitalists against deeply impoverished and
fragile need economies (Sanyal 2013), where the transfer and concentration of assets took more
the form of primitive accumulation than of “market rationalization.”

71 With no lack of irony, President Rafael Leonardo Callejas (1990-94), referring to agrarian reform
beneficiaries, asked: “Why are they not going to sell if it has been their lifetime work and effort? ... I do
not agree with those who believe that it is a step back for the Agrarian Reform. On the contrary, it is the
culmination of a process. Now, a peasant can receive 500,000 Lempiras for his hard work” (quoted by
Suazo 2012:73)
Figure 5. Palm oil, $/mt, real 2010$

Summarizing, the traditional interpretations of the land sales during the 1990s in the Aguán place most of the blame on a limited set of internal and external conditions of the agrarian reform cooperatives. Externally, the blame is placed on the LMA, the land hunger of foreign large landowners and the lack of state support for the cooperatives; remarkably, no mention is made of the drop in the international prices of palm oil in the late 1980s (see figure 5). Internally, the lack of appropriation of the cooperatives by its members, the inherent individualism of the Honduran peasantry and the ubiquity of corruption are presented as the main reason behind the sales. I have presented instead a much more complex picture, one that includes these elements, but places them within a broader political economic context.

From the early development of the BAP, a process of differentiation began to take place within and among the cooperatives. This differentiation tends to be rendered invisible in most analyses of the Honduran agrarian question, due to the tendency to gather all of the cooperatives into one single category: the reform sector. However, as I have shown in this chapter, the differentiation between “inside” and “outside” cooperatives is crucial to understand.
the general outline of the land sales process. This differentiation is also important to understand why many of the cooperatives decided to sell their lands to an external actor such as Facussé, rather than to other cooperatives within the region. This situation speaks not only to the sort of resentments and frictions that were festering within the reform sector, but also to how COAPALMA and its capacity to concentrate market power had become a crucial arena of contention. If in 1981 the cooperatives affiliated to the second level cooperative had gone on strike to recover some of their control over the value produced by the palm oil industry — and thus blocking the “control grab”72 (Huggins 2014) attempted from the state —, in the early and mid-1990s cooperatives such as the San Isidro decided to sell their land before bowing to the almost monopolistic control that COAPALMA had over the regional market. Irony aside, what these two cases show is just how much value the cooperatives placed on retaining some sort of control over their production. More than a struggle over vertical integration or capitalist exploitation, their struggle was over being able to sell their production to the best bidder.

Another element to be taken into account is the context of global economic liberalization and the drop in the prices of palm oil, which allowed businessmen such as Facussé to both enrich themselves at the expense of the state (not paying his debts), and use their newfound dollars to buy land at really low prices in highly devalued Lempiras.

So far my approach to the topic of the sales has been basically from “above,” as I have focused in the structural reasons of the sales. As I have been arguing, this is the space on which most of the explanations of the sales move. However, severely lacking from these narratives is the presence and experience that particular groups had within the process. Phrased differently,

72 Control grabbing refers to the capacity to control, either directly or indirectly, land and other associated resources such as water, as well its actual and potential uses, in order to corner the benefits. In this particular case, I am referring to the attempts of controlling COAPALMA and thus, the potential monopsony position of this second level cooperative over the region’s palm oil market.
these narratives present the sale from a highly masculinized perspective that effaces the experience that women had on the process. This in part makes sense; in the end it was clearly men who sold the cooperatives. But at the same time, this account forgets that although the agrarian law did not see women as involved, they had also been part of the whole process of creation of the Aguán and thus, also had a stake in the fall of the reform sector. In the next section I return to Eugenia’s story – with which we began this chapter – as a way of seeing the process of land sales from a more concrete standpoint, one that is also grounded in her experience as a woman. At the same time, her story allows us to return to the topic of monetization and the introduction of the palm oil industry, and its effects within the peasant households.

**Of cows and oil palms: experiencing primitive accumulation**

Eugenia’s testimony regarding the sale of the cooperatives’ land is a particularly useful window into the shared experience of many women who witnessed how their husbands, brothers and fathers sold the land that they had received and fought for through the BAP. In terms of content, there is nothing exceptional about her story; I heard many similar ones told by very dissimilar women all over the Aguán. However, what makes Eugenia’s testimony special is the way in which she tells it and the very profound reading that she makes in retrospect of the loss of the cooperative’s lands. My aim in this section is to use her particular story as a way of characterizing and bringing to life some of the central characteristics of the process of land sales, as it was experienced by women.

For Eugenia, the sale of the land and the dissolution of the cooperative were done in three strikes, all of which were connected to the introduction of the palm oil industry. In the first, the place where they lived was separated from where the oil palms were located. In the second, they lost the cows. In the third and last one, it was the turn of the land to be lost. Thinking about that period in retrospect it all becomes clear to her. These three strikes that
could appear disjointed actually had a deep connection and were part of a broader process. As we will see, for her this was a profoundly gendered process as well.

In the last chapter I described Eugenia and Marino’s journey to the Aguán and the difficulties that they encountered once they arrived at the cooperative. Initially, they lived on the land that had been designated for them. There was no difference between where they lived and the lands that they worked, initially with milpa, later mixed with oil palms and finally as a palm oil monoculture. These were lowlands close to the river and thus vulnerable to floods. The board of directors informed them that because of this, they could not live in that place anymore, that there was a new housing project nearby and that they would move further uphill to a less flood-prone area. Eugenia does not remember the exact dates of the housing project, but by looking at documentation of other cooperatives, it would appear that it was around the mid to late 1980s. Eugenia believes that this was not such an innocent move. She tells me,

Now I understand. The directors used to tell us: ‘look, we cannot stay here.’ But we had been living there for a long time; I gave birth to all my children there. And they would say: ‘we are no longer going to live here because the river can sweep us away, it is better to move up there, we have to buy land and move up there’ So they bought a piece of land and divided up into lots and we all moved up here.

The separation of the place of residence and the oil palms meant two things for Eugenia. First, it would be easier to sell the land if no one was living there and if the people had their own home plots, distinct and distant from the land cultivated with palm. Second, it meant spatially separating women’s work from men’s work and this, as we will see soon, had a profound effect. As I have discussed in various points of this chapter and the last one, the creation of the cooperatives resulted in a clearer differentiation in terms of gender positions. Particularly after the cooperatives began to concentrate only on oil palms, the household’s provisioning rested more and more on the wages received by the men for their work in the fields. This of course, made the women more dependent on their partners and the domestic work that they did was
rendered invisible, as it did not produce money. What the housing project did was to inscribe this differentiation on the landscape of the cooperatives, as both spaces became separated.

The relocation also had an effect on land uses by women. Before the housing project, there was less differentiation regarding the land used to keep and feed the few cattle that the cooperative had and that each household could buy, as long as they had the board of directors’ approval. This meant that women spent more time together, taking care of the livestock, growing and harvesting some vegetables, picking up wood, collecting water, looking after the children and washing laundry. However, once they moved up to the new housing project, the plot that each family had was distinct and separated from those of other families, and the linkages and collective spaces for women became fewer, deepening the differentiation between the private and the public spaces and who could operate in each.

Then came the second strike, the sale of the cows. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the cooperative had bought collectively around 85 cows, which would rotate between the different families. Individual families could have their own cows and other livestock, such as pigs, as long as they received permission from the board of directors. In the context of the relocation to the housing project, two things happened that opened the way for the selling of the cows. First, the relocation was connected to the decision that had already been taken a few years earlier to only cultivate oil palms. Not only did keeping cows distract cooperative members from their monoculture dreams (more area dedicated to oil palms equaled more money from the sales), but also, in the new place of residence, there was supposedly no available space to keep animals. Second, with the separation between the family plots, the cows had also become a sign of internal differentiation and generated frictions between families.

Eugenia remembers that when she first heard that the cows were going to be sold, she was opposed:

They began wanting to sell the cows and I come down fighting for nothing. Now I understand that I was fighting for nothing. I wasn’t a member; he [Marino] was
the member. I told them ‘no, you are not going to sell the cows.’ I spoke with the president and asked him ‘why do you want to sell the cows? Don’t sell the cows. Look how many children are going to be left without milk.’ He responded ‘what happens is that you are against us selling the cows, because you know that if we sell them, you are going to have to sell yours also.’ And I insisted, that no, that was not the reason. ‘Look, what has been decided, has been decided, and no one can stop it’ he responded.

She continued to mobilize and got together the other women of the cooperative to discuss the issue and get support.

I went and spoke with some women. I told them: ‘Women, we cannot let them sell the cows. Give me money because I am going to go and denounce the sale on Radio Tocoa.’ Now I laugh, because I went to do nothing. I spoke on the radio about how the cooperative was selling the cows, I thought I was denouncing, but in the end it was for nothing.

In the end, her efforts were not successful and the cows were sold for around half what they were worth. Further, other members of the cooperative responded to her attempts in anger, and pointed out that the reason that she did not want the cows to be sold was because she was taking advantage of the cooperative:

I was so mad at them! I told the president that they were giving away the cows almost for free. And another woman that was with him turns around and says to me 'let them sell the cows! You are against because you are living off the cooperative, putting your children to study, that is why it hurts you that they are selling the cows. They are going to sell the palm trees also. It is too much, you are here preparing your children, and we here like dumb people that are left with nothing.' I responded that she didn’t put her children to study because she didn’t want to. That she had the opportunity also, and that I wasn’t taking a cent away from the cooperative to have them study. You should have seen the fights! But at the end, they sold the cows.

After the sale of the cows, there was a change in the board of directors and if the former one had sold the cows, the new one was intent in selling the land with the oil palms. The process by which the lands were sold was quite clearly gendered. In a process similar to that of the sale of the San Isidro cooperative, the members of the cooperative began to discuss the possibility of selling their land a few months before the actual deed.

The reason for the sale, according to Marino, was that since in the government of Callejas the cooperative’s debts had been forgiven and now they could think about following the
steps of those other cooperatives that had already sold – Buenos Amigos, Guanchias – and see how much they could get. Internally, things were not looking good. The price paid for palm fruit was low and many felt that COAPALMA was taking the lion’s share. Further, there was a feeling that not everyone was working as much as they were supposed to. Marino remembers what they used to discuss: “That there were people that didn’t want to work and they would just pretend; that there were a lot of people just trying to live off of the others. Others would say that some of the members were too old and didn’t get any work done. So then it was decided that it was better to sell.”

These discussions would take place among the “palm trees,” as they refer to the plots covered by the oil palms, to make sure that women would not find out about them. According to Eugenia, they were worried that the women would find out and oppose the sale. This comment was a clear reference to her, as she was the most vocal voice against the sale. However, she always maintains that she is quite sure that most women were also against losing the land.

Marino also remembers that of the 40 or so members that the cooperative had, only eight were against the sale and that they were threatened.

Then, we didn’t agree with the sale. The eight that were against, we say no, that we didn’t agree. If they wanted to sell the cooperative, it was better to divide up the land and give each member the 12 hectares that they were entitled to. But one of them said: ‘no, with this gun that we have, we are going to cut down whoever gets in the way of the sale. It can’t be that because of one or two are against, we stop the sale. That is all we have to say.’

At the end, very much due to these threats, the decision was taken to sell the land. Eugenia knew about all of this because Marino would tell her about these meetings. Once she heard that the men had decided to sell, she resolved to do something about it. Sensing that gender differences were important in regard to the relationship with the land, she turned to what she saw as her natural allies, the other women.

I gather about five women and told them: ‘Look here, we can’t allow the sale of the cooperative. We have to stop it. What are we going to do? What are we going
to do with all those children? What are we going to eat? Where are we going to find a place to plant maize to sustain our children? Look how many boys and girls we have!'

For her the land had nothing to do with COAPALMA’s corruption, nor with the prices being paid for the fruit, nor with the critiques regarding the unequal payment or amount of work done by the different cooperative members. For her, the land had to do with the self-provisioning of subsistence items and the possibility of sustaining their families. This had nothing to do with her not knowing what was going on in these spaces; Marino would tell her everything about it. It grew out of a different relation with the land, one that was not as mediated by money as that of the men and thus more interested in those other uses and relationships that it could, and did, sustain. The way in which she remembers and narrates this episode contrasts not only with Marino’s, but in more general terms with most of the male testimonies that I heard. Just as I mentioned in the last chapter regarding the memories of the migration process, the memories of the land sales tend to split into the male perspective of money and work as against that of women, much more oriented towards the dynamics of provisioning and subsistence.

This difference should not be naturalized. I believe that it is the result of the differentiated positions from which men and women lived the shared experience of dispossession. Stuart Hall et al. (1978:394) argue that “[r]ace is the modality in which class is lived.” For the case of the Aguán I would make a similar case for gender: gender was the modality in which class is lived, but also the modality in which dispossession is remembered.

Regarding her crusade against the sales, Eugenia remembers:

They [the other women] told me that I was right and they gave 5 Lempiras each, so that I could go and look for someone that would come and talk to the directors and convince them to stop the sale. We couldn’t find anyone. I went to the neighboring cooperative, and they told me that they couldn’t intrude in the business of another cooperative. I went to the church and asked the priest to help me. He drove me all the way out to Progreso, to HONDUPALMA. I desperately spoke to them, asking them for help to stop the sale, that there were a lot of women who didn’t want to lose the lands. They told me that they could intercede,
but that people had already decided. They of course thought that they could run into some trouble if they got involved, but me, I wasn’t aware of this, I never wondered what could happen to me.

Eventually, both Marino’s and her lives were threatened, but she continued to look for help, any help she could find, to try to stop the sale. Then, one day Marino told her:

‘I am not going to sign. They say that if a single person refuses to sign, that they can’t sell the land.’ How quickly did they win over the rest! Only he was left against!

By then, everything seemed like a lost cause. The only thing stalling the sale was Marino’s signature and eventually a more concrete death threat came. Eugenia describes the situation to me. Marino was standing by a tree near the corner of his plot sharpening his machete when “a member of the cooperative arrived at our house asking for Marino. I told him where he was and they spoke softly, I couldn’t hear what they said. Once he left I asked Marino what he had told him. ‘He told that if I didn’t go and sign, they are going to kill me.’”

She was inconsolable. For her, losing the land meant losing pretty much everything: “I was crying. I wanted to be thousands of women so that I could stop the sale of the land. Those that didn’t do milpa, it was because they didn’t want to. It was God’s blessing to harvest maize! Any seed that you planted would grow up thick! We had maize to eat and to raise animals; but no, they sold the land.”

In Eugenia’s narrative, there is a deep connection between gender positions and the continuum between self-provisioning and wage labor and for her the sale had been a men’s deed. This thread in a sense connects the three strikes that I have described. First, with the relocation, came an even more severe separation between the domestic space and the place of the oil palms. This not only paved the way by literally moving them away from the land, but also separated women from the land and deepened the gap between self-provisioning and wage/market dependency and their possibility of making claims upon the land. Second, the sale of the cows not only showed the new differentiations between the households, but more
importantly, came to deepen ever more this gap. Without the cows – and other livestock for that matter – and with all of the land covered with oil palms, the scales were clearly tipped away from self-provisioning and towards wage labor. Finally, the sale was the logical conclusion of this process.

Her reaction to the money that they received from the sale – about $75 0– is also revealing:

I told Marino to keep that money away from the house, to deposit it in the bank. I didn’t want to know anything about that money! I tell you, the men took the money and spent it on foolish things, they bought guns, and they went insane! Everybody went insane. I used to tell them when I ran into them in Tocoa, that they should be careful with their money. What are you going to do when it runs out? And they would respond that I was pestering them because I didn’t want to sell. And now, if you go and ask, everybody will tell you that they were against the sale! You can go and ask! Nobody! Of course, it is because they are left with nothing. It was horrible; I came down sick and everything. And you know? For over a year I would not speak with the directors, maybe more.

While most people used their money for individual consumption,73 Eugenia did not want to know anything about that money. For her it represented the loss of the land – that linkage with self-provisioning – and that could not be replaced. For example, their home has concrete block walls, but she was adamant that I should know that they had done that with their own labor and not from the money that came from the sale. She makes a profound reflection on this matter:

Now life is different; it is different not having a piece of land. It is different and it is terrible. Never, never I tell you; after they sold the land we don’t know what an ear of maize is, what a maize plant is. We buy everything. First we used to buy Maseca,74 but now we figured out that it was better to buy an arroba of maize. Like they say, nobody dies of hunger, but it is not the same. Take for example the

73 There is an agreement in the different studies that explore the issue of the sales that the former cooperative members spent most of the money that came from the sales on this type of consumption. Although a lot of them spent a part of it on improving their homes – concrete block walls and sheet metal roofs –, most of the money was spent on guns, domestic appliances and liquor.

74 A brand of industrial corn flour.
case of the firewood. You know what I told them one day that they were gathering
to discuss the sale? ‘Men, stop talking about selling the land! Once you have sold
it, you won’t even have where to find some firewood! Now, now we can go and
bring our own firewood and we can go and fish wherever we want; you are going
to remember these things once you sell the land.’ They told me that I didn’t know
what I was talking about. And look what is happening now. Whoever goes there
[to the oil palms] for a piece of wood is left there. There is fish, I think, but
nobody can go fishing, because they run into trouble. It was terrible! Life without
land is very hard, because with a piece of land you can at least do a little milpa
and grow some beans, and at least one has his maize and beans, but like this, it is
very hard. It used to be a gift of God! Imagine we didn’t have to buy plantains; we
could just go and take them. It was the most beautiful thing, to have one’s land,
but without land... Look how we are doing now. I tell Marino that he should go
and see who would give him a piece of land to make milpa, but he tells me that he
is embarrassed to do so, after he had land and sold it.

**Epilogue: What is accumulated by primitive accumulation?**

For in practice it has turned out that primitive accumulation is an incomplete and
recurring process, essential to capitalism’s continuing life.


In this chapter and the last one, I analyzed the process by which a group of land poor and
landless peasant families from the country’s south and west left their places of birth and arrived
in the Aguán region in search of land and above all, a better life. This journey was marked by
significant changes in terms of their class positions, as they went from being land poor and
landless peasants, to cooperative members or mountain settlers, to landless rural workers or
some combination of the above. This was also, however, a journey of continuous
impoverishment framed by an ongoing process of primitive accumulation and class
differentiation that run also along gender lines.

Primitive accumulation must be understood as the process by which labor is
accumulated. According to Marx (1993) in the *Grundrisse,* this accumulated labor takes two
distinct – albeit interconnected – forms: objectified labor and living labor. Objectified – or past
labor – refers to labor that has already been spent in the production of commodities and the
transformation of the landscape. Living labor, rather, refers to the living subjects who have the
capacity to labor and thus are potentially workers. This idea of potentiality is important; I will return to it in a second.

Both forms of labor were crucial in our story. The phase of the ongoing process of primitive accumulation that begins in the Aguán in the early 1990s tends to be seen mainly as a process of dispossession and concentration of land. However, this is only a part of the story. Large amount of objectified labor had been literally grounded in the region in the form of roads, levees, houses, extracting mills, wells, and so on. Also, significant amounts of public funds were invested in the preparation for production of the palm oil plantations. For example, in the case of the BAP, it is estimated that 11,000 hectares were planted with oil palms, for an initial total cost of $100 million, and involving around of 7,000 producers, which represented more than 44,000 direct dependents (Pino, Santacreo, and Dunnaway 2002:2). This included both the infrastructure necessary for the industry to develop (roads, the Puerto Castilla port, extraction mills), as well as the planted plots. Let’s remember from the previous chapter that this planting was basically done for free by the cooperative members. All of this past labor came to produce the regional landscape and laid down the conditions for the development of the palm oil industry in the Aguán and Honduras.

Figure 2 shows the historical pattern of growth of Honduran palm oil production. The biggest growth in production takes place in the mid-1980s, but the curve of growth begins to steepen towards the late 1990s. Taking into account that oil palm plantations take two years to begin production, but hit peak production after around 7-10 years, it is clear that this development and consolidation of production was the direct result of the cooperatives’ labor and in effect a subvention the new owners received from the state and the cooperatives.
Not only past, but also living labor was accumulated in the process. However, it was not only a case of separating the potential laboring bodies from the means of production, from their ability to self-provision. For living labor must be turned into a subject willing and able to produce under the control of capital he must be turned into a worker. In the case of the Aguán and the palm oil industry, it was necessary to create a subject different from what was understood as the traditional Honduran peasant. The worker had to be fixed to a place, able to work collectively and according to a certain discipline and temporality determined by the palm oil industry.

This was not an easy or immediate result, of course. It was the result of the disciplinary and production forms that were introduced and exercised through the creation of the cooperatives; the tension between the mountain as a space of freedom against the valley as a place of discipline and repression. Besides this discipline and temporality, it was important that this new subject – this worker – knew and understood oil palm cultivation and took it in as his own. Having workers who knew the terms used and the forms of planting, harvesting and taking
care of the oil palms were necessary conditions for the industry to flourish. Thus, with the sale of
the lands not only the plantations were accumulated in private hands. This knowledgeable and
disciplined subject was also “freed,” and with it a cycle of primitive accumulation that had
commenced with the beginning of these land poor and landless peasant families’ journey
towards the Aguán had come around full circle: from landless and poor, to landless and poor,
but now versed in the (mono) culture of palm oil.

However, to leave here would be to repeat what Silvia Federici (2004) has located as one
of the greatest shortcomings of Marx’s and most of his epigones understanding of the process of
primitive accumulation: ignoring and thus rendering invisible the particular experience of
women. For her, it is necessary to understand primitive accumulation as an ongoing process in
which it is important to highlight certain phenomena, such as:

(i) the development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women’s labor
and women’s reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; (ii) the
construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from
waged-work and their subordination to men; (iii) the mechanization of the
proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for
the production of new workers. (Federici 2004:12)

As I have been discussing so far, all of this process of primitive accumulation was, and
continues to be, deeply gendered. Not only did men and women experience it in different ways,
the process in itself came to transform the relationships between them and to create a divide
between productive (paid) and reproductive work (non-paid). In the words of Judith Carney and
Michael Watts (1990:211), “…external production relations... are fashioned and shaped by
internal (domestic) social processes; struggles around the point of production are, in other
words, inflected inwards or ‘domesticated’.”

In the case of the Aguán, primitive accumulation was domesticated along the thread of
monetization and the particular balance between self-provisioning and wage labor. The process
of organizing in the form of cooperatives meant that the reproduction of households rested ever
more on wages. This deepened the dependency of women on their male partners in a twofold
movement: on the one hand, women were basically blocked from both wages and property, as only males could be members (apart from female heads of households). On the other, with monetization came the separation between production and reproduction. This separation came to be inscribed on the landscape, as the story of Eugenia illustrates so well. As money became cooperatives’ highest priority, every piece of land that could be covered in oil palms became important. Thus, place of “residence” and of “work” were separated and having a place to keep the cows became less important. This differentiation also changed the relationship between the members of the cooperatives and the land. While for the men selling the land meant selling a bad business and receiving more money than they ever had seen, for women like Eugenia, it meant losing their foothold, however fragile, on the conditions of self-provisioning and thus, at least the illusion of autonomy, as the loss of their shared spaces and spatial mobility so forcefully shows.\textsuperscript{75}

The traces left by this shared experience of dispossession were also quite different across gender lines. The fact that women remember more from the standpoint of subsistence, while men from that of money and work, gives us an important methodological cue: had I only interviewed men – as all of the studies on the land sales do – I would only have learned about the internal dynamics of the cooperatives, the terrible labor conditions and corruption by the cooperative leaders, thus effacing the experience of women and the effects that this process of primitive accumulation had on the households and their relations regarding land and market.

I would like to finish this section in a more provocative tone. One of Federici’s (2004) main arguments in \textit{Caliban and the Witch} is that one of the reasons for the witch hunt – for the aggressive attacks upon women during the medieval period in general – was to remove their presence from the frontlines of the revolutionary struggle taking place against the feudal dominant classes (to which capitalism should be read as a conservative counter-revolution.)\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{75} For a similar argument for the Nicaraguan case, see Montoya (2003).
According to Federici, primitive accumulation had to be deeply gendered to secure a particular form of male over female domination that would keep in check women’s revolutionary potential. From Eugenia’s story, particularly her efforts to stop the sales, the argument could be made that a similar gendering process was needed to assure that primitive accumulation – the land sales – would take place. By separating women from the land and by undermining their position within the communities and limiting them to the household, they were in no position to try to stop the sales. One has to be careful when posing these types of arguments, as it is easy to fall into a naturalization of gender. In this case, my argument is grounded on the particular experience of the women that I met in the Aguán, and whose possibilities of stopping the land sales were deeply curtailed by the position that they had in relation to the cooperatives and the land.
Chapter 4: Between state, church and capital: creating subaltern narratives in the Aguán

By the late 1990s, the agrarian counter-reform and primitive accumulation set in motion with the land sales in the Aguán were thoroughly consolidated. The tension between the valley and the hills remained. But the freedom that could formerly be found in the latter was limited, as land access became ever more difficult and productivity levels dwindled after more than ten years of a slash and burn agriculture had destroyed much of the fertility of the soils. In the valley, the concentration of land and industrial power by a handful of palm oil investors had come to shift many of the local dynamics: need economies were supplanted by capitalist ventures. With this shift the regional market was disrupted as surpluses were pumped outside the Aguán. This in turn translated into generalized impoverishment as less money circulated in a region and there was less access to land. Moreover, the remaining palm oil cooperatives lost much of their power and their meager political autonomy, as the coercive laws of competition became the new game in town. Finally, at the same time that former cooperative members were torn between migrating yet again, or remaining in the region as day-laborers, women lost their tenuous foothold on self-provisioning of their households and thus found themselves in an even more precarious situation.

As the agrarian counter-reform consolidated and impoverishment and inequality worsened, the Catholic Church and the Jesuit priests who arrived in the mid-1970s began to voice a counterhegemonic discourse. Placing the tension between valley and hills at the center, these priests embarked on a political project that sought to improve the situation of region’s poor by bringing both geographic spaces together and propounding ideas citizenship and justice. This project was unable to gain much traction before the late 1990s, but in the aftermath of the land sales many people began to see the Jesuit’s historical narrative and political practice as more meaningful.
From the mid-1980s onwards, under the banner of the Pastoral Social (PS; Social Concerns Ministry), the Church had attempted to bring all of its different social projects under one roof. In the wake of Hurricane Mitch, which devastated the North Coast in late 1998, the government delegated efforts at relief and reconstruction in the region to the Church.

Through a general and brief overview of the activities of the Catholic Church and the Pastoral Social, this chapter analyzes the following topics: the situation of the Aguán in the late 1990s and the characteristics of the hegemonic bloc that consolidated around palm oil monoculture; the complex role played by the Church, as both a parallel state and as a counterbalance to the regional hegemonic bloc; the Jesuits’ emerging historical narrative about the region — and the practice that this informed – which provides a frame for understanding the cycle of land recuperations that came in the aftermath of Mitch; the impact of Hurricane Mitch and how the Church saw Mitch as a golden opportunity to push forward its social transformation agenda. Finally, I argue that although there are multiple historical narratives regarding the turn of the century in the Aguán, in general all of them are covered by the overarching one articulated by the Jesuits. This narrative can be understood as a myth that articulates past with present and that proposed a particular political program.

The hegemony of monoculture: palm oil and political power

According to Peter Marchetti (1998:8), a Jesuit priest who arrived in the Aguán in the late 1990s (and who later left the Church):

Standard Fruit [Company], Facussé and Morales are not citizens in the Bajo Aguán, but of the globalized world, and know very well how to pillage the local resources to enrich themselves and take advantage of the local traditionalism to increase their modern excesses. The companies operate without caring about the regional development, just like the banana companies did at the beginning of the 20th century. With the [agrarian] counter reform, the levels of economic activity in the valley plummeted because the three companies import most of their supplies and service structures. They are modern enclaves in a sea of misery.

During the period prior to the 1990s agrarian counter reform, a sort of virtuous circle existed between the cooperatives, understood as need economies, and the regional market in
which they spent most of their money. This “virtuous circle” was of course riddled by contradictions, conflicts and tensions, as we saw in the last chapter, but after the land sales, this (somewhat) virtuous circle gave way to an enclave model in which a few investors came to control the industry and the surpluses created were pumped out of the region in a much more direct fashion than before. This control was achieved not only through the concentration of land and labor power that I described in the last chapter, but also through what is known in the land grab literature as a “control grab” (Borras et al. 2012; Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Huggins 2014).

The palm oil industry is very susceptible to vertical integration and monopsonistic concentration of power, particularly in the phases of processing and commercialization. The bigger processing mills – particularly those owned by Facussé and Morales and to a lesser extent those of COAPALMA and the Salamá cooperative – are able to control the prices and large shares of the market, even without owning all of the land covered with oil palms. This not only concentrates considerable power in a few hands, but also increasingly placed palm oil monoculture at the center of the life in the Aguán region. For example, regarding the living labor that was “freed” with the sale of the cooperatives, Marchetti (1998:7) mentions that:

The [former] members [of the cooperatives] used a part of their inheritance [from the sale of the lands] in various forms: the majority to drink more, have more women, a very large group to buy cars, urban houses, [or] to migrate to San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba or Puerto Cortés; a third group (10 percent) to buy houses in the hills, to buy cattle and deepen the desertification and floods through extensive cattle ranching; a fourth group to start microenterprises in the valley. [Finally] around 20 percent of the ex-members are working for Facussé and Morales earning 60 percent less than what they used to make as [cooperative] members.

With these “inheritances” spent, most of this labor came to be under the control of the palm oil monoculture. In this regard, all of the studies on the region (Macías 2001; Castro 1994; Marchetti 1998) agree that the next step in the process was generalized impoverishment, with those families that formerly had been in the cooperatives taking the brunt.
When we move from the valley to the hills, the situation was significantly worse. Not only were there fewer wage labor and commercialization opportunities available than in the valley, there was less access to basic services such as education, health or electricity. Moreover, after ten years of slash and burn agriculture the hills were deeply eroded. Erosion and destruction of the land in the hills was also an indirect effect of the agrarian counter reform, since peasant families were forced to move to the hills in search of land or to escape the exploitative relations in the valley.

**Producing hegemony in the Aguán**

As a corollary to impoverishment and dispossession, there was also growing institutional fragmentation and an absence of social and political organization outside and against the concentration of power by the palm oil larger companies. Paul Jeffrey (2002:49), a Methodist missionary and longstanding reporter in Honduras, describes how in this period:

> With the agrarian cooperatives in a process of dissolution, with the patronatos [community based councils] plagued by party politicization and with dysfunctional popular organization, the citizens of the Bajo Aguán valley were left with very few options to act in a coordinated and organized manner to resolve their problems.

This lack of social organization and the sense of permanent crisis and social and political flux produced a situation that facilitated control by a hegemonic alliance of palm oil entrepreneurs, cattle ranchers and army colonels that had deep ties with functionaries in different parts of the Honduran state. It would be a mistake to think that this was an organizationally structured alliance. It involved instead certain general and basic consensuses regarding which were the best conditions for capital accumulation and for maintaining elite domination in the region. The glue that held this coalition together was a deeply ingrained anti-communism, which made it easy to distinguish the good from the bad and that served to legitimize the use of force against any opposition.
This loose alliance managed to maintain control over the region with a combination of coercion and to a lesser extent consent. In terms of coercion, the military has been historically the only state institution with a constant presence and a stable foothold in the region. It has been the cornerstone of control there since the early years of the Bajo Aguán Project (BAP). I already mentioned in the previous chapter the case of Isletas, the active participation of members of the armed forces in the process of land dispossession, and how they were paid in kind for their aid. But there were other forms of control besides direct intervention. It is worth remembering that up until 1996, Honduras had a compulsory military draft. This was often used by people with access to the military to remove individuals who were deemed rebellious or as a way of settling personal scores. In many cases whether a young man was drafted or not depended on connections and class and political affiliations (Cameron, Dorling, and Thorpe 2000).

In Honduras the structures of domination – and the resulting institutionalization of hegemony in the form of the state – have historically combined a vertical line of command with a very diffuse and disjointed presence in the regions. Geographically organized from the city of Tegucigalpa, the Honduran government line of command begins with the figure of the president, expresses itself regionally through the members of the national congress, the municipal governments, and the communities, where it takes the form of the patronato\textsuperscript{76} [community level councils]. Is through this line of command that public funds flow; thus, these posts are crucial for political control since they operate as the links between geographical scales. This model operates on the idea that through these strategic posts, votes flow from the bottom to the top; at the same time as public funds, projects and political favors flow from top to bottom. This makes these public posts highly strategic and contentious spaces, where local,

\textsuperscript{76} The Patronatos are part of the Spanish Colonial legacy. They were in charge of raising funds and organizing the communities’ patron saint’s days.
regional and national elites, organized in a two-party system, struggle to maintain control through sets of strongmen who operate as enablers and gatekeepers, controlling the flows in both directions. In their relationships with the communities, these strongmen would distribute the access to resources, such as electricity or new schools, based on political party affiliation and in the form of personal favors that stand out in the landscape, since many of the schools and community health centers that dot the region are named in honor of such “benefactors” or their family members. At the same time, these strongmen are powerful figures in their own right – usually local businessmen or cattlemen, often with ties to illicit organizations (thievery, money laundering, and drug trafficking, among others) – that see in these public posts the possibility of consolidating their positions and accessing different types of resources (from the use of the military and police to settle personal scores, to utilizing public funds to gain popular support).

By the early 1990s opposition to this hegemonic bloc was almost non-existent. Historically and mainly due to the high levels of repression, the left’s presence in the Honduran political system had been tenuous to say the least. Moreover, in a remote place – in terms of media coverage and presence of state institutions, particularly the judiciary – such as the Aguán, the military was able to operate relatively freely against anything that emitted the slightest leftist odor. The agrarian counter reform brought significant changes in the role and weight of different groups and significantly weakened sectors that had earlier served as counterbalances to the hegemonic bloc.

Before the 1990s, INA exerted control over the peasant cooperatives through debt and direct intervention. Nonetheless, in the Aguán and particularly after the 1981 COAPALMA strike, the cooperatives had been able to carve out some autonomy and to a certain extent push the peasant confederations to which they belonged beyond their comfort zone. With the 1990s and the agrarian counter reform, the peasant movement was greatly weakened and divided both nationally and in the region. In the case of COAPALMA, it went from between 40 and 50 affiliated cooperatives in the 1970s and 1980s, to around 19 in 1998 and from around 14,000
cultivated hectares to around 750. The opening up of the regional palm oil industry meant that survival would now be mainly determined by the coercive laws of competition (Marx 1992); thus, the cooperatives had to function more and more as commercial enterprises, to be very careful with their public image and to steer clear of anything that might connect them with the political left.

The situation of the national peasant movement was not any better. The development of the national peasant confederations was very much entangled with the agrarian reform process. This meant that over time, as their affiliates became more consolidated as cooperative members, the push to organize landless peasants diminished. By the time the agrarian counter reform came around, it became impossible for these organizations to muster any sort of coordinated resistance (Ríos 2014).

In sum, the aftermath of the agrarian counter reform in the Aguán shifted the balance of power in the region. The new hegemonic alliance was organized around a group of local cattle ranchers – who had been the dominant class fraction in the period prior to the BAP in the 1970s –, the new investors in the palm oil industry – with René Morales and Miguel Facussé at the helm – and a group of colonels that provided the military muscle. This was a diffuse and loose alliance, which in political culture terms, came together around a set of shared interests and a deeply ingrained anti-communist commonsense.

There were not many opposition options available. The peasant movement was in retreat after the agrarian counter reform. The small peasant individualism of many inhabitants, an economic structure organized mainly around agriculture and the near absence of a middle class meant there were not many options for organizing opposition to the new hegemons. The only institution at the time that had the resources and legitimacy to mount some sort of own opposition to the regional hegemonic bloc was the Catholic Church.
Historically, the Church has had a very important role in Honduras. Because of the historical institutional weakness of most public institutions, the ruggedness of the terrain and the highly dispersed population, the Catholic Church has had in many cases to “play the role of the state” and provide services such as education, healthcare and the registration of births (Martínez Peláez 2011; Martínez 1998). The Church’s presence, role and relation with the communities have been uneven through time and space and different regional formations can be found, with different church orders promoting different forms of relating with their parishioners.

This is not the place for a full account of the Church in the Honduras or in the Aguán. For our purposes, the story begins in the late 1960s. Before 1968, all church work in the region was coordinated from Trujillo by the Vincentian Priests and there was no priest in Tocoa. However, this changed that year with the arrival of the Spanish Franciscan priest Jaime Pratsdesaba. He bought a house in Salamá, a small village close to Tocoa, and initiated his religious work. Seeing the high levels of poverty and the lack of access to land in the community, Pratsdesaba began to organize a group of 45 parishioners to occupy national lands in the vicinity that had been grabbed by local cattle ranchers. Once they managed to “recuperate” the land, based on the social teaching of the church, the Spanish priest organized the same group of parishioners to work collectively and created the Salamá Cooperative.

In 1972, seeing how much the region’s population was growing, the church decided to create the San Isidro Parish, based in Tocoa, to extend its work over all of the region. Also, according to the Jesuit priest Guadalupe Carney (1985), in 1974 Bishop Jaime Brufau of San Pedro Sula asked the Jesuits to take over the Trujillo Diocese, which contained the four small parishes in the department of Colón, including Tocoa. The arrival of the Jesuits in the region coincided with the development of the BAP. From the beginning, the Jesuits were very active in the region. Thanks to the close relation that existed between the ANACH and Father Carney, their work was oriented mainly around organizing and supporting peasant cooperatives. These
were all priests influenced by Liberation Theology who tried, as they would say, to create “the kingdom of god on earth.” They were particularly active in the area of political training, especially through their radio schools – teaching reading and writing as the basis for organization – and through the formation of delegates of the word.77

In those early years, as I described in the last chapter, the situation in the region was quite complex and conflictive. The Jesuits tended to be in the thick of the struggle for land, but also were usually the first to denounce injustices taking place within the cooperatives (corruption and violence above all). They were very worried about the process of differentiation that was going on around the palm oil cooperatives. Speaking of how they did not pay their day laborers a fair wage, one of the priests remembers that they used to say “if these cooperatives continue to go this way, they will end up being organized terratenientes [large landowners].” Unlike the INA and most state institutions in the Aguán, the Church worked in both the valley and the hills, and thus probably had the clearer picture of the types of contradictions that existed between these spaces.

Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, a set of events took place that shifted the ways in which the Jesuits approached their political work in the communities. First, on June 25, 1975, the corpses of 14 people who were heading to a national hunger march in Tegucigalpa were found in the Hacienda los Horcones, in the Department of Yoro. Among the dead were the American priest Jerome Cypher and another priest, the Colombian Iván Betancourt. Perpetrated by members of the Honduran army with the support of local cattle ranchers,78 the massacre was

77 Delegates of the word are lay members of the community who are trained by priests to preside Sunday religious celebrations as well as to explain and study the Bible with the rest of the community. Usually selected for their leadership skills, delegates of the word have much more of a political than a religious role, as historically their training has been connected to Liberation Theology.

78 Including Manuel “Mel” Zelaya’s dad, José Manuel Zelaya, who in fact was the owner of the Hacienda los Horcones.
understood as an attempt by the military government of the general Alberto Melgar Castro, to stop the increasing militancy and radicalism of the peasant movement. The fact that two priests were among the victims was a clear signal to the major allies of the peasants of what could happen to them.

The effect of the Horcones massacre within the church was massive. In the aftermath of the killings, both the military men and the big cattlemen intensified their attacks against the Church and its link with opposition political parties such as the Christian Democrats. As a result, the Bishops’ Conference sent an order to all parishes to lay low and fire anyone affiliated with the left-oriented parties. This basically meant a retreat from any open political activity. Father Carney (1985:347) comments bitterly on this in his autobiography: “from that time in 1975 until today [1979] it is very notable how the Catholic hierarchy, the majority of the priests and also the laymen in Honduras retreated from any social commitment and became nonpolitical and very anticommunist.”

The second event came about six years later and its location and impact are circumscribed to the Aguán region. As I mentioned in the last chapter, in September 1981 the cooperatives affiliated to COAPALMA went on strike to demand more control over the second level cooperative. The organizing which led to the strike was the combined effort of both the peasant federations and the Church and, as we saw, it effectively stopped the control grab attempted by the state.

Once the strike was won, however, it became evident to the priests that corruption and state control were not going to end with a change of administration. When the time came to elect who would make up the board of directors of the “new” COAPALMA, the church tried to organize and push for a more independent group of leaders to take over. However, in the end the members elected to the board were the ones that had been involved previously, had close ties with the state, and that were seen as corrupt. For the priests, this was a clear signal that there was not much to be done with the cooperatives in the valley. Corruption had rooted too deeply
in the organizations for the social change that was needed in the region to come from there. Further, at the time, it was easy to see that the settlers of the hills had been less tainted by the palm oil monoculture, were poorer and in need of more help. From this moment on, the Church’s approach would truly be a “preferential option for the poor,” as father Pedro Arrupe, Superior General of the Jesuits, wrote in 1968 in a letter to the Jesuits of Latin America. This decision would have its consequences down the road.

A particular reading and understanding of the region came out of these experiences and the forms in which the Jesuits worked in the region. Because the Church was the only institution operating both in the lowlands and the hills, their reading of the region was much more rounded than that of other organizations, such as the cooperatives, which derived their understanding of the regional conjuncture only from their experience in the lowlands. Further, the fact that the Church was already present in the Aguán even before the arrival of the first cooperatives and that it had had in different periods members with long traditions of political organizing and leadership in different parts of Central America, 79 allowed this group of Jesuits to have a better grasp of the regional history as a whole and turn it into a meaningful political narrative. Phrased differently, due to the particular experiences of its members and the historical role and position of the Church in the region, Jesuits such as Marchetti or Carney were in a privileged position to

79 For example, Father Carney had been working close to ANACH long before arriving to the Aguán. In the case of Peter Marchetti, he is a Harvard-trained economist, who arrived in the Aguán in the late 1990s after an extended period of work in Nicaragua as a priest and as an economic advisor to the Sandinista government. His high profile was intended to strengthen the work that had been done in the previous decades in the region by the Company of Jesus. Worth mentioning also is Ricardo Falla, a Guatemalan Jesuit and anthropologist who led the Pastoral Social before the arrival of Marchetti and had by then a longstanding relation of work with displaced indigenous communities in Guatemala (see, Falla 1994).

This sort of political experience was not limited only to the priests, but also to some of the Pastoral Social’s lay staff, such as Berkeley-trained U.S. geographer Jennifer Casolo, who had been working with various church and relief organizations in El Salvador until her arrest by Salvadoran government troops in November 1989.
take the “fragmented and episodic” elements of the Aguán’s subaltern histories – in both lowlands and hills – and turn it into a historical narrative that could gain traction on the ground, as it related directly to the experiences of many of the communities in the region. It is also important to point out that this was necessarily a retrospective view, one that ordered what on the ground was felt as disjointed events.

Probably the most polished version that we can find of this reading is the one presented by Peter Marchetti in a 1998 working paper for the San Isidro Parish titled “Hamlet sin Príncipe: an analysis of the Impact of Agrarian Modernization in the Lower Aguán River Valley.” For Marchetti, three elements were crucial to understand the Aguán region: first, the process of colonization and the differentiation between valley and hills that came with it; second, the need to understand the Aguán as an agrarian frontier; and third, the non-presence of the state in the region.

Regarding the first point, the colonization process, for Marchetti the whole BAP was doomed to fail from the beginning. He declares,

The agrarian reform had as its fundamental axis the African Palm monoculture by cooperative enterprises. The State was not the least concerned or nor did it respect the development of the models of peasant household production. It did not matter that hundreds of millions of state subsidies rained upon the agrarian reform enterprises in the valley. Neither the State nor the municipal governments gave a droplet of public services for the peasant communities of the hills and mountains.

The result of the agrarian reform in the valley were palm oil enterprises full of corruption and cooperatives without the participation of the members; in the hills the result of the spontaneous Colonization was the development of a migratory agriculture and extensive cattle ranching, with enormous ecological consequences. (p.5)

At the same time that this happened in the valley, the hills were also being colonized in the form of three successive waves. For Marchetti, as we saw earlier, the first wave was done by the people living in the valley at the moment the cooperatives were founded and who decided to migrate up the hills in search of land. Regarding the second wave,
...at the beginnings of the 70s it was the waged peasants that escaped the cooperatives towards the mountains. They preferred producing with dignity in the mountains to living in poverty in the valley and waiting for the oil palms to mature. This second wave sent messages to their families in the hot and worn out land in the West of a promised land, where 30 cargas [loads] of maize could be harvested with just clearing and burning, without fertilizers or much work, due to the goodness of the Gramoxone [a commercial synthetic herbicide]. The bean plants were beautiful and 15 quintals could be harvested without any problem of plant diseases. (p. 4)

And finally, “[t]he poor from the West came in a third wave — a truly human avalanche. This spontaneous peasant Colonization populated the national lands in the hills and mountains of the valley with twelve thousand families — six times more than the State Colonization project in the valley” (p.4).

It is important to note how in Marchetti’s analysis the spaces of the valley and the hills are understood as a dichotomy much as my peasant interlocutor Luis described them (see Chapter 2). While the valley was a place of exploitation and working for others, the hills were a place of freedom and labor for one’s own benefit. Further, nature was more generous and allowed for traditional agriculture to flourish with almost no need of agrochemicals. Finally, particularly after the third wave of migration, the hills had come to be home to the poorest of the poor, who happened to also be the largest group in the region and one that was rendered invisible because of their location outside of the purview of the state – that is, outside of the palm oil monoculture – and with little to no political clout.

For Marchetti, the Aguán region – but particularly the hills – had to be understood as an agrarian frontier, where

The violence against nature was repeated against the local society. The cattle ranchers of the agrarian frontier are the cowboys of the North American Western movies... In the three municipalities of our Parrish, it is estimated that there are 800 murders each year. More than half of these killing happen as part of the cycle of vengeance among poor peasants. This represents a murder per household in 7 percent of the families in our zone – war-scale violence levels. Nobody speaks about this violence, because no one is allowed to speak. Reporting a homicide to the authorities is suicide within the culture of the agrarian frontier. If the murderer is a cattleman, the public law and order forces will not do anything. If the killer is a poor peasant, the police are unable to capture him as he escapes up
the mountain. When faced with a murder it is better to stay quiet, escape with your family or kill the family members of the perpetrator. No community would offer support to the forces of public order because they [feel they] are not citizens and have no rights in that sense. Anyone who speaks with the police is a person marked for death. (pp. 5-6)

Moreover, this violence between humans and against nature had other repercussions when nature strikes back:

The forests absorb and reduce the speed of the water running down towards the valley’s rivers. Migratory agriculture in a short time eliminates enough forest protection in the hills, particularly in the focal points of the extensive cattle ranching, as to produce a flood in 1974 with the rains from [Hurricane] Fifi, which cost hundreds of lives. Hurricane Juana in 1983, of a much lesser intensity, produced more deaths due to the enormous increment in the deforestation during that decade. Since 1983, there has been more desertification and more floods. The palm oil and banana companies have made massive investments due to abandoned infrastructure and the construction of protection levees. The sand and dust from the levees has replaced the natural protection of the forests in the river basins.

In 1993 strong rains that lasted only a few hours produced the same human disaster as the 1993 flood, taking more than 70 lives in the small hill community of Abisinia, and producing great destruction in the city of Tocoa. It was the right sign to celebrate the first anniversary of the [agrarian] counter reform and the Agrarian Modernization Law.

Violence between people and violence against nature come together in the agrarian frontier to create a stateless situation, the third element in Marchetti’s account. Where “there is neither legal order nor citizens, only political and economic caciques, as the violence and insecurity increase on a daily basis” (p.7).

For Marchetti, at the root of the problems in the Aguán was the lack of a state that would guarantee justice and the rights of the people and that would strive to improve the conditions of the poor. However, this lack of a state was not seen simply as an absence of public institutions or a lack of justice in judicial terms. According to Marchetti, the biggest lack in the Aguán was of citizenship. For him it was a dream to believe that there was a chance of creating a more just society in the region by taxing the rich and having state institutions present. Rather, the solution lay in
...creating a citizenship of rural poor, willing and able to pay their taxes for the state services. With a local citizenship, the foreign enclaves and the Hondurans that live like foreigners in their own country, would have to change their neoliberal attitude of making the environment and the others pay for the costs of their enrichment. (p.8)

In addition,

...the only result without citizenship is a more rooted and hard to question [political] verticalism. The quality of the professional services goes down; bureaucratic corruption is transformed into bureaucratic/feudal corruption, the administration ends up being very similar to the Spanish administration during the conquest and the maintaining of the Indian communities outside of any legal scheme. (p. 8)

This idea – the necessity of an active citizenship in the Aguán – would become the central guideline of the political and social practice of the Jesuits in the region. From the late-1980s onwards, and under the banner of the Pastoral Social, the priests and lay staff of the PS, began to embark in a set of activities, projects and programs aimed at raising consciousness, increasing levels of organization and improving the living conditions of the population in very direct and concrete ways. In this sense, from the beginning, the PS was stuck in a complicated situation. On the one hand, it worked to organize the poor around access to rights and effective citizenship. On the other, it provided services – such as education and health – that should have been provided by the state.

We find a clear example of this tension in the case of the Socorro Jurídico Program (SJP). Under the idea that there can be no citizenship if there is no justice, this pro bono legal aid program was created in 1988 and was one of the first organized by the PS. Initially serving Tocoa, but eventually with a presence in the entire region, the SJP’s main objective was to improve the communities’ access to justice. To do so, the SJP tried both to organize the communities and provide a direct service. Regarding the direct service, the SJP provided the region’s poor pro bono legal aid in its offices. Most of the people coming to receive this service were women and most of the claims had to do with family law matters (alimonies, parental recognition and child custody, among others). This would seem to point to the non-presence of
the judiciary in the region, even for the most basic sort of legal services. The fact that the regional office of the Public Prosecutor was only opened in the mid-1990s, and as a result of the pressure of the PS, is another indication of this non-presence.

In terms of community organization, the SJP moved in two directions. First, it attempted to promote a culture of peace and of alternative forms of conflict resolution, which supposedly would contrast, and eventually supplant, the eye-for-an-eye logic that was so pervasive in the region and that reflected the reality of the agrarian frontier, as characterized by Marchetti. To do so, they would work directly with the communities, figuring out which were their main problems and trying to find solutions, either directly using their own means, or by pressuring the state to fulfill its duties. Also, to operate as a liaison between the SJP and the communities, the figure of the legal promoter was created. Legal promoters were men and women from the communities, usually close to the Church, who received basic legal and paralegal training and who were supposed to be the first line of legal defense of the communities. Second, through their contact with the communities they would collect local grievances and together with other organizations, would push the state around certain claims. Two examples of this are the installation of a Public Prosecutor’s office in Tocoa and the regional mobilization against obligatory military service in the mid-1990s, which eventually gained enough national traction so that the Honduran state ended the draft in 1996.

The PS operated around five main structures. Besides the SJP, it had a sustainable agriculture program, through which it tried to promote more ecologically friendly forms of agriculture in the hills, at the same time as promoting a responsible use of natural resources, such as water and forests. There was also a health program, oriented mainly towards alternative medicine and sanitary organization and education for both the communities and families. Fourth, they created a gender and development program in which Eugenia, whose story I presented in the last two chapters, was deeply involved, and that attempted to improve the self-esteem of women and open up spaces in which they could be active participants in the
transformation of their families and communities. Finally, there was an alternative community commercialization program, which tried to tackle the peasants’ lack of market access and their lack of means of transport. This involved moving their produce from the hills to the markets in the valley and bringing basic provisions that could not be found in the hills from the valley.

In sum, the Jesuits were stuck between becoming a sort of parallel state, covering that which the state was supposed to provide, at the same time that they tried to organize the population to force the state to fulfill its duties. It was the old question of paternalism versus popular organization, which had become such a hot topic within the Latin American left from the 1960s onwards, and the debates regarding the difference between reform and revolution (see for example Villegas 1972; De Sousa Santos 2005). This tension came up in a lively way when I asked a former longstanding member of the lay staff of the PS whether she thought that during this period – the late 1990s and early 2000s – they had played the role of the vanguard or the role of a parallel state. After some pondering she responded somewhat bitterly: “we thought that we were the vanguard, but really we were a parallel state.”

I have already mentioned that the PS had a clear bias towards the hills as against the valley in their work. This did not mean that they did no work at all in the lowlands, but that the type of work that they did there was quite different. If in the hills there was this constant tension between vanguard and parallel state, in the valley they focused mainly on supporting, financially but also through political training, those incipient organizations that were trying to take form in the region. They were particularly interested in creating spaces of confluence between the communities in the hills and the ones in the valley. This was never an easy venture.

While in the hills most of the problems resulted from a lack of access to public services and markets, in the valley the main problems had to do rather with lack of access to land or well-paid work and of basic civil and labor rights. Further, there was a clear difference in the sort of leadership that the PS found in each space. According to organizers from this period, most of the leaders from the hills came from the western regions of the country, had less political experience
and tended to be slower at assimilating new knowledge and forms of organizing. In the case of the valley, there was a greater tendency for leaders to come from the southern section of the country, with far more experience in political organizing. Also, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, many of the families that migrated from the valley to the hills did so running away from the forms of collective labor and discipline present in the lowlands. They tended to be far more suspicious of any kind of leadership and more inclined to resolve their problems with their feet (migrating) rather than organizing.

All of these differences made the creation of spaces of confluence both important and difficult. Probably the most paradigmatic example of these attempts came in 1988, when the PS and the National Rural Workers Central (CNTC) invited participants of every popular group or association in the region – big or small – to unite under an umbrella group called the Permanent Assembly of Popular Organizations of the Aguán (APOPA). This effort was done in conversation with left popular leaders from Tegucigalpa who were trying to create a broad national movement that eventually could capitalize electorally. APOPA combined vanguard politics with a populist discourse. However, as we might expect from the organization’s profile, it ended up being monopolized by the interests and leadership coming from the valley. Further, once the implicit electoral agenda behind the creation of the organization became evident, there were clashes between the CNTC and the PS over strategy and eventually APOPA dissolved in bitter infighting. For the PS and the Jesuits this became another example of why community organization and the focus on the hills were the only viable way to go.

At the same time, through a very slow, disarticulated and painful process, different groups were beginning to organize around shared grievances, mostly related to access to land. At the moment these were quite isolated processes with very few channels of communication among them; as a priest told me “in Colón there is a lot of organization, what we don’t have is unity.” Nonetheless, at the same time, certain fractions of the Honduran left were also pushing towards the creation of a new national political party with some of the remnant leaders of the
once strong peasant movement involved. In this context, everything seemed to be pointing towards the agrarian reform as that broader project that could come to resolve many of the problems in the region. The PS accordingly shifted the emphasis of its strategy towards organizing a broad agrarian platform that could push towards re-launching the agrarian reform, but this time including the interests and necessities of the hill communities, as well as combining it with a citizenship perspective.  

**The agrarian reform as the path to the future**

On August 7, 1998, the PS sponsored a forum in Tocoa titled “Together Let’s Strengthen the Agrarian Reform.” The forum was seen as an effort to take advantage of the renewed interest that part of the national left had in the agrarian reform as a way of capitalizing electorally, as well as the arrival in office of new government officials who seemed to be more supportive of the peasant movement. Particularly important had been the appointment of Aníbal Delgado Fiallos as the new executive director of the INA by the newly elected President Carlos Flores Facussé, a nephew of Miguel Facussé, who had come into office in January, 1998.

The forum became a space in which different regional actors were able to share their experiences of the processes of agrarian reform and counter reform in the Aguán. The opening

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80 There is of course a close relationship between citizenship and land within Western legal and rights history. Immanuel Wallerstein (2003:651), in his historical review of the idea of citizenship, shows that there is a close relationship between landed property and citizenship. According to him, after the French Revolution citizenship came to encompass two types of rights: passive – the right to the protection of the person, of property, of liberty, etc. – and active – the right to public and political advocacy and representation. Passive rights are universal, while active are limited to particular segments (historically white, male and bourgeois). In this way society can be based on equality (passive rights), at the same time that it excludes (active rights). The boundaries between these two types of rights have shifted throughout time and “[t]he story of the nineteenth century (and indeed of the twentieth) has been that some (those with privilege and advantage) have been attempting to define citizenship narrowly and that all the others have been seeking to validate a broader definition. It is around this struggle that the intellectual theorizing of the next 200 years centered. It was around this struggle that the social movements were formed.”
speaker, a member of the regional branch of the labor union of INA employees, inaugurated the session with the following words:

From the former Capital of the agrarian reform in the Bajo Aguán, receive a fraternal welcome, hoping that this First Peasant Forum may allow us to reflect on the land sales of the different peasant enterprises, which have cost so much sacrifice, sweat and even death. Today they [the lands] are being hoarded by national and foreign investors. Also, may it serve to get to know the policies that the current government intends to implement in terms of agrarian reform. Welcome be all to this Peasant Forum. (Altiok 1998:7)

The first speaker to follow these welcoming words, a regional representative of INA, emphasized how land could not be seen as some simple and basic raw material, but as the foundation of life itself, as well as the necessity that the peasant movement had of uniting. However, at the same time, he spoke of the importance of efficient and competitive production, where the peasant was to be, above all, an important actor within the market. Moreover, following the liberal mantra of personal responsibility, he laid at the feet of the peasant families the responsibility for their own development.

The two next speakers, both important members of the PS, took the stage and addressed directly the type of interpretation presented by the INA representative, presenting in broad lines the historical narrative that I characterized in the previous section. According to them, the blame was not so much on the peasant families of the cooperatives as on the types of policies that the INA had promoted. For example, according to Peter Marchetti, the then general coordinator of the PS:

The agrarian reform in Honduras was not planned or driven by Hondurans. It was one of the ten conservative and counter insurgency agrarian reforms that were planned by the USA under the Alliance for Progress... In the Bajo Aguán... it was designed and financed by the Inter-American Development Bank, a bank under strict US control. It is fair to say that the Agrarian Modernization Law and its planning were part of the great Agricultural Transformation Project of Miguel Facussé, one of the great Honduran entrepreneurs.

This alien model implemented a top-down technocratic agrarian reform, in which the actual members of the cooperatives had little say. It had fostered multiple levels of corruption
and coercion by government officials and national and local peasant leaders. Then, once the LMA had taken hold and inaugurated the neoliberal era, the INA and the agrarian reform structures in general had allied with big capital – with Miguel Facussé at the helm – to convince the cooperatives to sell and thus leading to the current situation of pervasive poverty.

After these official presentations were given, it was time for the members of the cooperatives to speak, which produced some of the most memorable moments in the forum. I will not dwell on the speeches here (but see Casolo 2009 for a detailed gender analysis of the context). What interests me more is how they speak of a bitter moment, in which the reform sector was licking its wounds at the same time that those who had sold were coming to regret their decision to sell. It was also a finger pointing moment, as blame was directed at the INA for the way the agrarian reform had been deployed, at the businessmen and companies that were profiting from the sales, and at the male leadership of the cooperatives that had been corrupt and had sold the cooperatives’ assets. It was also a moment to rethink the need for agrarian reform to improve the life of those living in the Aguán and the crucial role that the state had to play in this regard.

As the forum was closing down, it was the turn of Aníbal Delgado Fiallos to take the stage and present his position as the new director of the INA. His words clearly revealed the type of agrarian reform that the government was thinking about. Early into his speech, the INA’s executive director mentioned that

> It is important to propel a deep process of agrarian reform... Logically, one thing is what is ethically desirable and another thing what is historically possible. That is why we at the INA have relaunched an idea of the agrarian reform that would be possible under the political, social and economic conditions of Honduras and within the frames of the standing legal norms. (Altiok 1998:15)

What was this historically viable agrarian reform? One organized around three main principles: first, a broad land titling program, as well as the promotion of the access to land of indigenous groups; second, a process of reconversion empresarial, which can be literally
translated as business restructuring, and referred mainly to making profitable businesses out of the staple crops producing cooperatives, even if it meant producing something else; and third, the institutional strengthening of the INA, to make it more efficient and transparent, which included not repeating “the errors of the past” and excluding those who had sold land from any future participation in agrarian reform projects. As we can see, undoing the sale process or embarking on a broad redistributive program was not to be part of this “new” agrarian reform.

However lukewarm Delgado Fiallos’s proposal might have been, the forum came to a close with an atmosphere of optimism and hope. At least he had come and had winked at the peasant movement and the idea of re-launching the agrarian reform could become a reality. If anything, this could be taken as an open door that the peasant movement could knock on and open up more ground as it had always done: by applying pressure through land recuperations. But just about two months after the forum, Hurricane Mitch crashed into the impoverished North Coast of Honduras, and this new hope would become mixed with despair, salting old wounds, creating new ones and above all, revealing the deep set of contradictions that had brought the Aguán into being.

Hurricane Mitch and the wounds of the Aguán

There is no such thing as a natural disaster. In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus.

At all phases, up to and including reconstruction, disasters don’t simply flatten landscapes, washing them smooth. Rather they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter.

— Neil Smith (2006:n.p.), “There’s No Such a Thing as a Natural Disaster”

Mitch, the hurricane and later tropical storm, hit the Central American Caribbean Coast on October 26-27, 1998. The fourth strongest storm in the history of the Atlantic Basin, it struck Honduras the hardest, leaving a trail of destruction and misery. Mitch was not your typical storm. From the 28th of October and until early on the 30th, it hovered over the sea and then very
slowly – between the 30th and the 31st – it began to move inland, first as a hurricane and then as a tropical storm that ended up covering most of the country. Due to this erratic behavior, it was initially thought that it would not be too destructive and that its effects would be circumscribed to the North Coast. Thus, the country was ill prepared to deal with what was about to happen.

More than the winds themselves, it was the rains that came with the storm that did most of the damage. In some regions the amount of rainfall in a couple of days was the same as the yearly average (Olson et al. 2001) and it was estimated by some farmers to have had the effect of ten years of rain (Holt-Giménez 2002). In the end, over 5,000 Hondurans died, more than 8,000 disappeared and around 285,000 people lost their homes. Around 60 percent of the nation’s infrastructure was seriously damaged and around 70 percent of the crops were lost – including coffee, bananas and pineapples – which represented a loss of over $800 million in the agrarian sector alone (Olson et al. 2001). This means that around 38 percent of the Honduran population was directly affected by the hurricane, which caused total damages equivalent to 72 percent of the gross national product (FAO 2010). For all practical purposes, at the end of 1998 Honduras was surviving off of the foreign aid that began to roll in once the level of destruction became evident. The levels of the aid received were substantial. For example, the per capita foreign aid received by Honduras jumped from $50 in 1997, to $129 in 1999. Food aid shipments jumped from 21,000 tons in 1997 to 169,000 tons in 1999 (Morris et al. 2002).

However, if Mitch as a natural event occurs at the end of October 1998, the conditions that made it possible for Mitch to become the type of dramatic disaster that it did had been many years in the making. For example, a study by the FAO (2010:2) that explores the relationship between land tenure and natural disasters, concluded regarding Mitch that

A century of environmental degradation, poverty, unequal access and distribution of the land and military conflicts, together with almost eight months of droughts due to the El Niño phenomenon in 1997-98, contributed to aggravate the effects of the hurricane, causing floods of a greater intensity that should have been expected from a storm with these characteristics; emphasizing the social and environmental vulnerability of the region.
The heavy rainfall was the most destructive characteristic of Mitch. This rain fell on hills and mountains that were heavily eroded from slash and burn migratory agriculture.\textsuperscript{81} The settlement of poor peasant families along the river banks and creeks aggravated the situation and led to landslides and floods. Just as Neil Smith (2006:3) describes for Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, these floods did not simply flatten the landscapes of the valley, but rather, “...they deepen[ed] and erode[d] the ruts of social difference they encounter[ed].”

The ways in which natural processes mixed with political economy to create a profoundly disastrous effect (Watts 2013) were quite evident in the Aguán region. Here, the combination of water, mud and debris that resulted from the heavy rains, came flowing down the hills and into the valley, following the patterns left by the cracks and crevices created by the processes of internal differentiation that I have been describing in this and the previous chapter. Jennifer Casolo (2004) gives a vivid description of this process:

\[T\]he high winds and floodwaters washed away over three thousand homes (the majority simple mud and stick structures) and damaged another ten thousand. Most valley communities lost their water pipes. Forty percent of the crops were destroyed. All temporary and permanent banana workers lost their jobs, the temporary ones without compensation. Almost every bridge in the Aguán was washed out, as well as four kilometers of paved highway... It lay bare, at least in the eyes of the eighty percent who had been vulnerable before Mitch, that development policies had developed large-scale agribusiness, but not much in terms of infrastructure and social services for the majority of the population. (p. 42)

Particularly salient in this “laying bare” were the levees constructed by the palm oil investors on one side of the river to protect their plantations from the constant flooding of the Aguán River. These levees,

\textsuperscript{81} In fact, a study carried out in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in the Central American region shows how the plots of those peasant farmers that used agro-ecological methods, as opposed to the forms of migratory and traditional agriculture that I have been describing, presented more topsoil, field moisture and vegetation. Further, “On average, agroecological plots lost 18 percent less arable land to landslides than conventional plots and had a 49 percent lower incidence of landslides” (Holt-Giménez 2002:10).
...had left the inhabitants of small towns and neighborhoods exposed to the swelling river’s full force on the other side. Valley and hill-dwellers alike also traced the high losses of mountain soil and crops back to the counter-reform. While not exonerating the slash and burn practices of small farmers, many people associated overuse of the hill land with plummeting prices in the de-capitalized valley and a widening of the frontier by former cooperative members turned cattle ranchers. (p. 43)

For example,

Miguel Facussé bought the cooperative Quebrada de Arena. He then invested in levees to protect the oil palm. The Aguán River, unable to overflow into the palm plantations, washed over 420 homes, completely destroying the 38 houses made of mud and straw. (p. 43, fn 94)

**The aftermath of Mitch: reconstruction as citizenship formation**

Hurricane Mitch came to reveal – to lay bare – the effects of the particular form in which the Aguán’s landscape had been produced. In this way, the patterns of destruction left by Mitch and the patterns of dispossession left by the agrarian counter-reform seemed to overlap, with the expansion of the oil palm monoculture right in the middle. An example of this came just a few days after the rains from Mitch had stopped. Jennifer Casolo, who at the time was working for the PS as coordinator of the gender and development project, wrote in her notes:

As I open the door to the parish, two men approach me—persuasive, persistent, refusing to be peripheral. “I am José,” says the larger (5′6″) of the two. This perhaps thirty-year old man, thin, wearing shorts, his legs streaked in mud, holds out his hand to me, “We are from Prieta.”

Prieta occupies one of the first cards in my mental rolodex. The four bridges between Tocoa and Prieta now resemble islands with their adjoining sides washed away. Two days earlier, we, three parish health workers and myself, had jumped the wide cracks and dragged ourselves by rope through the river water that ran over our heads, to reach Prieta. 20 kilometers from Tocoa center, it qualifies as one of the hardest hit of the eleven valley communities located on the western side of our parish. Water from the raging Aguán, unable at first to hurdle the levy that protected the nearby banana plantation, took vengeance by swallowing the 250 homes of the village. The wealthier had fled in their trucks in the middle of the night. The poor, the majority, had survived by occupying the only two-story building in town, the cooperative’s version of the “company” store. Now they were “lodged” under plastic sheeting along the highway and in the dank, cold African palm processing plant a village away.

‘We are not members of the cooperative, we are the day-laborers. We live in the mud houses along the river. Our homes have been washed away. Our jobs no
longer exist. The cooperative members have received aid, but they don’t share with us. We have no food, no clothing, no work. Their cement block homes are filled with mud, but at least, are still standing. We have nothing left.’

This marks my first acquaintance with what will continue to happen for the next couple of weeks as hundreds of people from the outlying valley and mountain villages make their way through knee high mud, destroyed trails, dangerous rivers, to inform us of the state of their communities: homes leveled, crops destroyed, meager jobs lost. They approach the Catholic Church, which during the repression of the 80s and the structural adjustment policies of the 90s served as ‘the good state’ in juxtaposition to the national government, to say: ‘help!’

As we can see from this long quote, Mitch literally rendered visible the deep contrasts that existed in the region in terms of location (between hills and valley) and class (between cooperative members and day-laborers, for example). Further, it highlighted and brought even more to the fore the role of the Catholic Church as a sort of parallel state in the region. From the beginning, the Catholic Church, and particularly the PS, took the lead in disaster relief. Besides the use of its buildings as shelters, the PS used its cars in the rescue effort and helped organize the collection of food, drinking water and medicines.

This position by the Church came to be formally consolidated as the state decided by November 1998 to dump much of the relief labor – distributing food aid and organizing and controlling the shelters, for example – on the church. This reflected both the lack of logistical capacities shown by the state and the generalized suspicion by both Hondurans and foreigners about the levels of corruption in most public institutions, both nationally and locally (Falla 1998; Jeffrey 2002). This became particularly clear after the May 1999 donors meeting in Stockholm between the Central American governments and five European countries, the IMF and the World Bank. During this meeting the parties negotiated conditions for the reconstruction aid at the same time that NGOs and some grassroots organizations lobbied to make sure that the negotiated aid included a commitment to increasing local participation in the process. Thus, “by signing the Stockholm Accords each Central American government committed itself to decentralization, citizen participation, transparency, environmental protection and the promotion of gender and ethnic rights” (Casolo 2004:43).
This sort of negotiation at the international and national scale had clear effects at the local level. In particular, the requirements set in terms of transparency and democratic grassroots participation in the process of reconstruction connected well with the PS's own objective of creating an active citizenship in the Aguan. For the Jesuits then, the disaster was seen as a way of advancing their social transformation agenda. In 1999 the PS in the Aguán began a massive program of work for food, which was bankrolled by the USAID and supported by Catholic Relief Services. In the end, the PS came to channel around $7 million worth of food aid to over 678 affected villages and neighborhoods (Casolo 2004). 82

Using these funds as a lever, the PS determined that in order for the communities to access this aid, they had to organize themselves into Local Emergency Committees (CODEL). This requirement was informed by the particular reading that the PS had of the region and of the local patronatos, which were seen has highly corrupt, controlled by the traditional political parties and with very low levels of accountability, democratic participation and gender inclusion. In contrast, the CODELs were designed to be non-exclusionary and to create a new more participative and democratic political culture, which could eventually translate into the creation of a new breed of citizens. In this sense, the members of the CODELs were elected by village assemblies that were to be involved in both the definition of the emergency assistance and reconstruction plans. All the members of the community were encouraged to participate and there was a requirement of at least a 35 percent female participation of the committee. Further, to limit the possibility of any one person concentrating so much power, the CODELs were organized in committees according to the communities’ felt needs or interests (housing, housing, housing).

82 The food for work program included the construction of ditches and houses, as well as schools, drinking water wells, and latrines and clearing and rehabilitating roads. In many cases, the formula used was similar to the one proposed in the initial BAP. The Church would provide the materials and the communities, organized in the CODELs, would provide the labor. Also, the people participating in the labors received different types of foodstuff.
infrastructure, health, gender, education, among others). At its peak, the number of CODELs in the region reached 551 and in general the model was seen as a success, not only because it proved a very efficient way of distributing and using humanitarian aid, but also because it created levels of community and popular organization never seen before in the region (Jeffrey 2002).

By mid-1999, once the emergency period had ended and foreign aid began to dwindle, the question for the PS and other grassroots organizations in the region became how to consolidate and build upon what had been achieved with the CODELs. Changing the word emergency for development in the name of the committees allowed keeping the same initials, and the CODELs began to work in long term development programs. However, a few problems arose in time. The first and most important one was that this organizational form, however democratic and participatory, was highly dependent on funding from the PS. Thus, once the work for food program ended the incentives to continue working in the CODELs diminished.

The second problem, which is closely related to the first one, was the relation between the CODELs and the other organizations present in the region. The CODELs were organized in a way in which anyone and everyone could participate, regardless of their background or affiliations. This came to paper over differences based on class, gender and national political affiliation. During the emergency period in the aftermath of Mitch it was easier for people to come together due to their shared experience of the disaster. However, as time went by, these sorts of differentiation came back again to the fore. Also, as the next campaign period began gaining steam in the run-up to the 2001 elections, organization through the political parties — traditional sources of patronage — became a priority. This hit the CODEL movement particularly hard, as many of the most renowned leaders were involved in the up and coming left-oriented party Unidad Democrática (Democratic Union).

In general, through a slow but constant process, some CODELs began to disappear and others shrank or weakened as the better off people and the cooperative members began to
withdraw, making the CODELs a peripheral space in the communities. Here gender and class lines became strong again, with women and the poor among those that remained invested in the committees.

It is, however, essential to recognize the importance that this form of organization had in the region. A 2000 report on popular participation in the Aguán, estimated that to June of that year, little less than 10,000 people were directly involved in the CODELs, which represented roughly 45,000 households involved (Schmid 2000). More important than these numbers, was the qualitative effect that the CODELs had. Not only did they come to dispute and disrupt the traditional forms of political organizing, they also brought people together, which allowed for both political formation and the creation of spaces in which the experiences and memories of dispossession of the cycle of agrarian counter-reform could circulate. Further, by putting people together to discuss the reality and the problems of the region, they allowed for disaggregated grievances to be woven together in the larger fabric of the region’s history, creating and disseminating a shared discourse that would come to inform and organize new struggles.

Nonetheless, the central issue in the region continued to be agrarian, with access to land remaining as the most important topic. The CODELs, due to both their initial interests and forms of organization, were hardly up to the task of organizing around these issues and eventually were overtaken on the ground by other types of organizations. These organizations were new, since in most cases they had new names and different discourses than those of the peasant movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Under those new clothes, however, the regional history of the Aguán, with all of its contradictions and patterns, continued to vibrate. We will see the form it took in the next chapter.

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83 To have a better idea of the coverage of the CODELs, according to the 2001 census, 246,708 people were living in the Department of Colón. If we consider an average of four people per household, this means that more than half the population of the Department were indirectly involved in the CODELs.
Epilogue: of myths, collective memory and political legacies

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.

Karl Marx (2008:12), 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon

In and through their practice in the Aguán, a group of Jesuit priests came to articulate an understanding of the region’s past, its present and a political chart for the future. According to this reading, the Aguán was the result of a limited agrarian reform, captured by elites, which created a pool of cheap labor in the form of the cooperatives. These cooperatives had little support and control over their own fate and the beneficiaries ended up being no more than glorified plantation wage laborers. With the passing of the LMA came the selling of the cooperatives’ lands – most by illegal means, but also because of the corruption of the cooperatives’ leaders – and with it, the transfer of the sweat and labor of the families that had toppled the forests to create the palm oil plantations to a group of foreigners that cared little about the families’ fate.

The present within this historical narrative was even bleaker. With the cooperatives gone, the region had turned into a plantation economy, controlled by foreign palm men – that doubled as drug barons in the case of Facussé84 – and transnational companies that exploited

84 Honduras is a central piece in the route that connects the point of cocaine production in South America with the U.S. market. For example, according to the 2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, “...as much as 87 percent of all cocaine smuggling flights departing South America first land in Honduras. The Northern Atlantic coastal region of Honduras is a primary landing zone for drug-carrying flights. The region is vulnerable to narcotics trafficking due to its remoteness, limited infrastructure, lack of government presence, and weak law enforcement institutions. Transshipment from the North Atlantic coastal region is facilitated by subsequent flights north as well as maritime traffic and land movement on the Pan American Highway” (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2013).
both people and nature to accumulate capital. The situation in the hills was even worse, where pervasive poverty and rampant violence against and among people and nature had created an almost barren landscape. All of these elements had come together around Hurricane Mitch.

Finally, in terms of the prognosis for the future, it was clear for the Jesuits – particularly at that moment for Marchetti – that an active citizenship had to be created to improve the living conditions in both the hills and the lowlands. This active citizenship would be able to create a new relationship with both the state and nature and the fundamental subject would be, above all, the hill peasants and the “healthier” sectors of the peasant and social movements of the lowlands. This reading changed a bit after Mitch, when it became evident that housing and access to land in more general terms were what could bring together the grievances of both the lowlands and hills. From here on, the idea was that a relaunch of the agrarian reform was the way to stitch together these two differentiated spaces and create a broader social base for social transformation. We can think about the resulting strategy as the promotion of an “agrarian citizenship” (Wittman 2009) in the Aguán.

I heard many variations of this narrative, emphasizing at times certain elements, or organizing them in different forms, depending of the position of the people doing the telling. This overarching historical narrative allowed for different groups to understand and position themselves and their experiences in regard to what was taking place in the region. This was particularly important in a place like the Aguán, which has been in a process of constant flux, with people coming and going and overlapping processes of migration and dispossession. I will present two examples to explain a bit more what I mean.

However, due to the fact that the Aguán operates mainly as a transshipment zone – with few clashes between groups for territorial control – and that drugs in the region have not necessarily impacted directly, but rather in connection with the agrarian dynamics that I am interested in, the topic is not analyzed in any depth in this study.
In the next chapter I will characterize the history of the Authentic Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MARCA) and of the Peasant Movement of Rigores (MCR). In the case of MARCA, the variation of this historical narrative revolved around the idea that they were the sons and daughters of those who had sold or had the land taken illegally away from them in the early 1990s. However, in one of the new groups that they created in the lands that they have recovered as “theirs,” there was not a single person that had been a member, or a daughter or son of a member, of the original cooperative. Rather, most members of the new group were part of a younger generation that had either been raised in the region – but had never worked in the former cooperatives – or had arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s and thus had no long-term roots in the region.

The current group of people in the MCR has been the result of two waves of migration into the Nueva Vida community. It took me while to realize this, as the historical narrative that I would usually receive tended to collapse both waves into a single process. The most noteworthy element is that of the original organizers – the first wave –, only five families remained in the movement and I was yet to meet them.

From these and other cases, it became evident for me that the broader historical narratives – the different variations articulated into Jesuits’ overarching one – operated as anchors or upon which different particular historical experiences could be hung or organized. Thus, the later arrivals at the MCR could see and understand themselves as part of a process that had begun long before their arrival; or the members of MARCA could justify themselves as sons and daughters of those who lost the land. I would argue that we can understand a narrative such as the one articulated by the Jesuits as an “origin myth.”

As Portelli (2010:153) argues, “...a myth is not necessarily a false or invented tale; rather, it is a story that becomes significant as it amplifies the meaning of an individual event (factual or not) into a symbolic and narrative formalization of a culture’s shared self-representations.”
In this case, this mythic historical narrative gives meaning and historical coherence to a set of shared experiences of struggle and dispossession in the current context of the Aguán. Following Portelli’s (1997) framework, what I am calling here a mythic historical narrative was of course the result of a set of individual memories that came to be abstracted or detached from their singularity, to be institutionalized – understood, repeated and appropriated – by a larger collective.

It is in this sense that I understand that the memories of struggle and dispossession that circulate in the Aguán – but that came to be gathered and organized around the template formalized by the Jesuits – as collective ones. This detachment or abstraction from the individual in the form of myth have allow these memories to transcend those who experienced them directly and to dwell – to become “present time” in Benjamin’s (1968) terms – in the class position of the impoverished peasantry in the Aguán. However, as Enrico Augelli and Craig Murphy (1997) mention in discussing Gramsci’s interpretation and elaboration of Sorel’s ideas, the myth not only tries to articulate past with present, but also to posit a future.

In a similar reading that navigates closely between Gramsci and Sorel, Rhina Roux (2005) argues that in the process of (nation) state formation, the creation of (national) myths is crucial. Following Sorel, she states that “‘myth’ does not mean in this case, as it does in everyday language, a legend or a false narration. Rather, it means the existence in the collective imagination, of representations regarding an undetermined future in time that motivates human beings towards action” (p. 13). These myths, which might change through time, help to articulate different social groups/class positions, since they “map” and help locate the relationship among these groups, and between these groups and society in general. Myths organize:

the fabric of bonds that reproduces the order in the individuals’ minds and behaviors regarding both themselves and their relations with others, as well as the set of rights, obligations and restrictions that, de facto or de jure, constitute
and recreate a mode of commanding and obeying, a mode of being subdued and
of rebelling and a form politics. (pp. 18)

For the case of Mexico, Roux argues that this myth was linked to the land. According to
her, the idea that Mexico’s territory was the immemorial patrimony of its indigenous
communities was so deeply ingrained in the commonsense of the subaltern groups that not only
had it survived through different cycles of dispossession, but it also had to be incorporated in
the governing pact that came out of the Mexican Revolution, in the form of article 27 of the new
constitution. For example, "[a]gainst the cold liberal utopia of an atomized society of abstract
individuals, united by the invisible ties of the market, these rebellions placed in front the
redeeming myth of the community, whose symbolic representation was the land, time and time
again" (Roux 2011:14).

In the case of the Aguán, the myth was also linked to land, but in a rather different
manner. In this case, national land had been used by the state to create the cooperatives, which
later had been illegally alienated. They, the nation’s sons and daughters, were the real citizens,
not the foreign large landowners that were hoarding their land. Peasants were thus entitled to
righting the wrongs of the past through a new agrarian reform in which, just as their forefathers
did in the 1970s and 1980s, would “recuperate” these lands for their use. In terms of the
mapping presented by this myth, the logic was mostly a Manichean one. On the one hand, you
had the good and redeeming poor Honduran peasants who would recuperate the stolen land. On
the other, you had the bad foreign rich landowners (René Morales, Reinaldo Canales and Miguel
Facussé), who had stolen the land for their enrichment. The myths were not only Manichean,
but also profoundly nationalistic and with religious overtones.

Of course, this type of mythical historical narrative made certain elements salient at the
same time that it rendered others invisible. I would like to mention two cases. First, although
the more refined and overarching form of this myth came from the Jesuits, in general the
tensions between hills and lowlands tend to be overlooked by most of the different variations,
including those by people who came from the hills. In this case, as I explore more in depth in the next chapter, the experience of the people living in the hills is subsumed in that of those living in the lowlands. This probably has to do with the fact that most of the more vocal leaders and peasant organizations in the region come from the lowlands. However, I think that it also has to do with the “visibility” of both spaces. While the lowland experience has always been in the shadow of state and capital – to borrow Steve Striffler’s (1997) evocative formulation –, the hills one – that of the people without history (Clastres 1989) – remained constantly beyond the view of both.

The other experience that has been deeply negated in this historical myth is that of women. As I showed in the previous chapter, women’s experience of both the cooperatives and the sale process were part of a broader shared experience, but at the same time had to be differentiated. This differentiation escapes most of the characterization of the history of the Aguán and the Jesuits’ formulation is no exception.

However, it does appear in flashes and moments, as in the case of the forum titled “Together Let’s Strengthen the Agrarian Reform,” which I mentioned earlier in this chapter. There the claim that “women would not have sold” came to have significant resonance in the form of a speech by Lastenia Méndez –the wife of a former BAP beneficiary and member of the PS’s women’s group. According to her, the main reason behind the sales was not the rampant levels of corruption or the violent manner in which the large landowners came after the land. Rather, at the center of the cycle of dispossession had been the fact that women had been excluded from the process. Further, she “...reminded men and women that the place they lived and worked, the Aguán, was also the product of rural woman’s arduous labor; work that men had not acknowledged and that had been drastically altered without women’s consent” (Casolo 2009:413).

According to Casolo, this speech and the sentiment that it generated in those participating in the forum had a deep impact on how the topic of gender figured in the land
re recuperation carried out by the Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MCA), to whose history I turn in the next chapter. The disruption of these masculinized narratives would also appear in the individual memories of people such as Marielos – whose interpretation of the coup I presented in the introduction – as they tried to make sense of the difference between their particular experiences and the overarching narrative.

For example, I met few people with a more ingrained nationalistic understanding of the agrarian conflict in the Aguán than Marielos. For her the contradiction between poor peasants and rich palm men was central. However, the exclusion and dispossession of poor Salvadoran peasants had no place in her narrative, even though her father had been one of those excluded and dispossessed Salvadoran peasants. Also, for her the tension between the idea of a unified peasant movement and her experience as women tended to come up against each other. For example, she remembers that during the initial period of the land occupations, both men and women would work, cook and suffer together, but that once the land had been “won,” men would go back to oppressing women and treating them as if they were less and under their control.

I will elaborate some more on this topic in the next chapter, when I analyze the peasant movements that were created in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. However, before moving to that I would like to point out the importance that going beyond this type of historical myths has when working and studying subaltern groups. I would argue that the recovery of the experience of these subaltern groups is crucial to interrupt or destabilize the type of dominant historical narratives that try to negate their existence. However, at the same time, it is important to interrogate the ways in which these myths and collective memories are also divided internally (Portelli 2010), shedding light on certain experiences and at the same time as rendering others invisible.
Chapter 5. “We are the agrarian reform!” Palm oil, the state and the struggle over land and value in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch

The multitude as a political force was born into – out of – the experience of defeat.

— Retort Collective (2005:4–5), Afflicted Powers

The aftermath of Hurricane Mitch came with an escalation of peasant agitation that seemed to reanimate the history and legacy of the peasant movement during the 1960s-70s golden age of agrarian reform. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Aguán. The destruction left by Mitch exacerbated older tensions and contradictions at the same time that it opened up space for the Catholic Church and the INA to operate in favor of some of the peasant groups. The result was a group of new peasant movements which, navigating the tensions between a fragmented and deeply patronage-based state and a palm oil industry controlled by a handful of powerful palm men, attempted to carve out some living space within the valley.

There is an overarching tendency in recent studies of the Aguán – whether journalistic notes (Carasik 2013), NGO reports (Bird 2013) or academic activist literature (Boyer and Peñalva 2012; Kerssen 2013) – to present the contemporary peasant movements as a unified entity with a single history. One explanation for this may be that most of the bigger and better known movements, such as the Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MCA) or the Unified Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MUCA), have names that refer to the region as a whole. I would also suggest that this picture of unity and coherence has something to do with the overarching

85 Vinay Gidwani and Dinesh Paudel (2012:262) identify a similar situation in Nepal regarding the Maoist movement. According to them, “‘Maoist’ is a retrospective description of heterogeneous peasant uprisings that was contingently articulated as a movement in the mid-1990s. Condensing this heterogeneity under the label ‘Maoist’ risks obscuring the long histories of local struggles as well as the diverse conditions and unanticipated events that made the Maoist movement possible.”
historical narrative described in the last chapter and with how different people and organizations tend to “attach” or locate their own particular experiences within it. There is,

**Figure 7. Location of peasant movements analyzed**

moreover, a tendency to focus on the more paradigmatic cases, leaving aside some of the smaller and lesser known ones. This clearly has to do with resources, as certain organizations, without being exactly rich, have access to a significantly larger amount of money and technical capacities to get their story out. Finally, since the larger movements are located in the lowlands, the history of the peasant movement as a whole tends to be told as irradiating from there, rendering invisible, or at least making it very hard to glimpse, the histories of those communities and movements located in the hills.
There is also some truth to the idea of the single overarching historical process, as there are shared elements between the movements and shared experiences between their struggles. Nevertheless this should be understood as a form of unity in diversity, in which the broader shared experiences and elements branch out into different particular trajectories that are shaped by the internal differentiations and tensions, as well as the transnational forces, that came to produce the Aguán region.

The most important difference between these peasant movements is the one between what I call “hills” and “valley” peasant movements. On the one hand, hills peasant movements refer to those movements that were created in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch and that were initially formed mainly by landless peasant families from the hills surrounding the Aguán valley. These were families with little to no organizational experience in the cooperatives and with very little knowledge of oil palm monoculture. They tended to target for recuperation lowlands estates on the left bank of the river that in most cases were not covered by oil palms. Thus, initially, they dedicated their effort to reenact the sort of agriculture that they knew best, slash and burn production of staple crops. However, eventually the attraction of monoculture became very strong, forcing these movements to seek paths towards the palm oil industry, mostly as sellers of labor power, but ideally as producers of the raw material.

A valley peasant movement, on the other hand, refers to those created by former cooperative members and a younger generation that claims to be their sons and daughters. Born into or molded by the oil palm monoculture, these movements organized around the idea that their lands had been taken away illegally in the early 1990s. They targeted former cooperative lands on both the left and right banks that were cultivated with oil palms in full production. Unlike the hills movements, these organizations’ and communities’ intentions have always been directed towards the oil palm monoculture, but as raw material sustaining need economies and as a way of keeping for themselves a larger cut of the surplus they produce.
In this chapter, I will analyze the historical trajectory of three such movements, focusing on the period between the sale of the cooperatives and the 2009 military coup that ousted the democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya. My aim is to shed some light on the way in which these movements navigated the tensions between state and capital in an attempt to consolidate a foothold in the region as landowners. I am particularly interested in showing that the Aguán region has become a social formation overdetermined by the oil palm monoculture. I will begin with the cases of the Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MCA) and the Peasant Movement of Rigores (MCR). These two are the quintessential hills peasant movements. While the MCA is the direct result of the organizing efforts of the Catholic Church in the aftermath of Mitch (see Chapter 4), the MCR had a much more spontaneous birth, with little to no initial external support. Next, I will present the case of the Authentic Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MARCA). Unlike the MCA and MCR, MARCA is a valley peasant movement born on the left bank. Beginning in 1996 with its attempts to recover the lands that it asserted had been illegally taken by Miguel Facussé and René Morales, it is also one of the first movements of this kind. Finally, I will briefly characterize the situation of these movements in the aftermath of the 2009 coup, as a way of bringing together some of the chapter’s claims about the structuring of the oil palm monoculture.

Before moving to the cases, it is important to add that this chapter’s temporality is a bit tricky. With very few exceptions, most of the historical reconstruction of the movements was done through interviews and memory workshops in the communities. In this sense, specific dates of particular events were sometimes hard to corroborate. Also, it was impossible at times to disentangle current events and processes from previous ones, contradictions tended to arise between different people’s accounts, and arguments would break out in the workshops regarding when certain situations took place. This means that even if I had wanted so, it would have been impossible to resort to what Trouillot (1995:14) calls the history “storage model.” In this model, “...history is to a collectivity as remembrance is to an individual, the more or less
retrieval of past experiences stored in memory.” Further “[w]ithin that vision, memories are
discrete representations stored in a cabinet, the contents of which are generally accurate and
accessible at will.”

This chapter should be read instead as a way in which people’s past – and more
importantly, the narratives that they construct of their past – inhabits and informs their
understandings of their present. I combine data referring to the past with my own observations
and their comments on the present to flesh out processes that are important for understanding
the current state of these organizations and the region as a whole. Stylistically, I decide to
refrain from quoting my respondents extensively, as this would have made the narrative
significantly longer and more complex than what I have space for in here. Rather, what I present
is my own elaboration based on the different narratives and variations recorded in an attempt of
transmitting in a clearer manner the more general story.

Arriving in the Promised Land: the MCA and the re-launching of the peasant
movement in the Aguán

In September 2000 the Guatemalan Jesuit priest and anthropologist Ricardo Falla (2000:n.p.)
wrote an essay titled “Land Occupation Opens the way for Agrarian Reform” in the Nicaragua-
based journal Revista Envío. Falla begins his article with a short description:

Around midnight on May 14, 700 landless peasants [families] of the Aguán, on
Honduras’s northern coast, occupied lands that belonged to the now dismantled
Regional Military Training Center (CREM) and that are currently claimed by
local cattle ranchers and farmers. A number of armed attacks by the ranchers
against the encampment set up by the peasant squatters culminated in the death
of rancher Diógenes Osorno on July 27, but the occupation continues and is
proving to be a transcendental event.

For Falla, there were three reasons why this land occupation was “transcendental”: The
first was historic, because of the role played by the CREM during the 1980s as the place where
the United States trained the Salvadoran army and Nicaraguan Contras. The second was
socioeconomic, since “this occupation seems to be rekindling the much-needed idea of agrarian
reform and could lead to the launching of a new, effective agrarian reform model as a way to
fight rural poverty.” The final reason was geopolitical, because “The CREM lands in the
department of Colón’s Caribbean coast area act as a corridor for drug-trafficking activities.”

Without reading too much into his words, it is clear that Falla saw in the agrarian reform
a key that would open the future of the country in those three directions (historically,
economically and socially and geopolitically). For the Guatemalan priest, there were, moreover,

...two factors that favored the creation of the MCA [Peasant Movement of the
Aguán]. One was the space opened up by President Flores’s government when it
appointed Aníbal Delgado Fiallos director of the National Agrarian Institute
(INA) at the beginning of 1998, as he had enough backing to start formulating a
new agrarian policy. The other was Hurricane Mitch, which forced many poor
people to emigrate from the riversides and other high-risk zones where they
lived. In several of the country’s departments, peasant organizations were able to
attract the floating mass of people searching for land. In the Aguán, Mitch also
made it necessary to organize using new methods and demands to help the
population. The Trujillo diocese, and particularly its Pastoral Social coordinated
by Pedro Marchetti, played a decisive role in this task. The Pastoral Social
initiated the organization of Local Development Committees (CODELs) ... as an
alternative to the traditional and politicized local boards, or patronatos...The
competitiveness and tension that had previously existed among the different
national peasant organizations began to dissipate for the first time around this
joint effort.

Regarding the people involved in the occupation, Falla explains that

The peasants who occupied the CREM lands were not from the surrounding
areas... The Campesino Enterprises were organized in the departments of Colón,
Olancho, Yoro and Atlántida, and when the decision was made on May 10 to
occupy the CREM lands and was announced to certain government officials in
Tegucigalpa as a sign of the year 2000 Jubilee, the peasants hired 50 trucks to
meet up at a crossroads near the CREM lands four days later. From there, they
would enter the former US military base at midnight.

What Falla fails to mention is that in most cases these families came from the hills and
had not been part of the cooperatives that were sold in the 1990s. Most had a direct or indirect
relationship with the Church, either as Delegates of the Word, lay workers or through kinship
ties with these. This land occupation and Falla’s interpretation of it have to be understood as a
particular way of approaching the topic of agrarian reform, one closely tied to the reading that
the Aguán’s PS had of the region and in accordance with the political practice that it had
followed since the late 1980s (see previous chapter). When Falla wrote this article, he was living in La Ceiba, a city two hours from Tocoa, but he had been in charge of the Tocoa Parish’s PS just a few years before.

There was something effectively new about this approach to the agrarian reform. Historically, the rhythm and velocity of the agrarian reform process in Honduras had always been set by the pressure exerted by the peasant movement through land occupations or recuperations, as they are commonly known. However, the complement of this pressure was state support for reform, which waxed and waned. In this case, the designation of Delgado Fiallos created a more welcoming attitude toward reform, but in reality it was the combination of the PS’s support on the ground and international aid that spurred the state on in this particular case.

**The roots of the MCA**

If we had to locate a starting point for the MCA, it would probably be the forum “Together Let’s Strengthen the Agrarian Reform,” which I described in the previous chapter. This is not because the MCA actually took shape at that moment, but because the central elements were starting to come together in an embryonic form.

First, we had Aníbal Delgado Fiallos’s attendance to the forum and his lip service to the need for a new agrarian reform. In addition, a group of mid-level functionaries sympathetic to the peasant movement were also to be found in the INA and Delgado Fiallos’s words signaled the opening of a space for action and support that they did not have before.

Second, a confluence of interests in the Church seemed to point towards an agrarian reform process. On the one hand, there were efforts to obtain legal titles for peasants in the hills that formed the Sustainable Agriculture Movement, which necessarily required direct negotiation with the state. On the other, through the *Socorro Jurídico* (legal assistance) program there was a growing sensibility to the difficulties of those cooperatives that had not sold, but were not part of COAPALMA.
I was able to speak to various members of the Tocoa PS of this period – including Marchetti – and there seems to be an agreement that what eventually became the MCA and the Guadalupe Carney community – of which I will say more in a moment – was the logical result of the types of reasoning and conversations that were being held in this period. However, there is also agreement that Hurricane Mitch and the particular role played by the Church in the emergency and reconstruction period speeded up the process.

Hurricane Mitch was a catalyst on several different levels. First, due to the particularly devastating impact that it had on the hills surrounding the valleys of the Aguán, Lean and Sula, a whole layer of rural poverty that had been hiding in clear view came literally walking down the hills into the major lowland towns and cities searching for refuge. They had lost their homes and crops in the disaster, making the housing question one of the fundamental and urgent needs. Second, the large amounts of aid money that were funneled to the country and the central role that the church had in the distribution, allocation and use of these funds, gave it the material tools to advance in such a project. This was particularly clear for Marchetti, who saw in this situation a window of opportunity to try to build citizenship from below through the CODELs (see previous chapter). Third, already before Mitch crashed into the Honduran north coast, there were talks by the national peasant federations about trying to come together and re-launch the movement. There is a saying in the Honduran left that “everything begins and ends in the Aguán,” so the idea of “restarting” the peasant movement from the Aguán made sense. Finally, there was the matter of finding the place in the Aguán where the project could be carried out and that was in accord with the legal limitations set by the LMA. The opportunity in this regard came from an unlikely source, as I will explore in the next section.

The Regional Military Training Center (CREM): from counter-insurgency hotspot, to home of the “new” peasant movement

What eventually became the home of the MCA had been a U.S. military base known as the CREM. The history behind the land is a curious one which I heard several times from many
people – from MCA members to human rights activists based in Tegucigalpa – with different levels of detail, but with a very similar discursive structure. According to this narrative, whose more refined version can be found in the papers of the Church,\textsuperscript{86} the story of this piece of land begins in 1965 when the INA gave six thousand hectares of uncultivated land that had belonged to the Truxillo Railroad Company between 1912 and 1942 to Fausto Fortín Inestroza. This was an illegal transaction. First, national land could not be used for anything other than agrarian reform – which giving six thousand hectares to a single individual certainly was not – and second, because there was a prohibition on selling this sort of land (agrarian reform), which is exactly what transpired in 1977. In that year, Temístocles Ramírez, a U.S. citizen of Puerto Rican origin, bought a bit over 5,700 hectares from Fortín Inestroza. This added another layer of illegality, as according to Article 107 of the Honduran constitution of that time, foreigners could not own land near the country’s coasts or international borders.

In 1983 the plot thickened when, at the express request of the U.S. government, the Honduran state expropriated Ramírez’s lands to build the military training base known as the CREM. This base operated as a training school for the Honduran, Guatemalan and El Salvadorian armies, as well as for the Nicaraguan Contra. However, in 1987 Temístocles appealed to the U.S. government, demanding compensation for the lands he had lost. This in turn led the House of Representatives to withhold $17 million of a $51 million loan to the Honduran government until the latter paid that amount of money to Ramírez. Thus, in effect, the Honduran taxpayers paid $17 million to have the U.S. install its base in their territory. At the end of the day, the lands were paid for with foreign loans and legally defined as “fiscal” or national lands belonging to the Honduran government.

In the early 1990s, as the military conflicts in the Central American region waned, the U.S. “returned” the lands to the Honduran state. This meant that it could and should be used for

\textsuperscript{86} Most of the information for this historical reconstruction comes from Fundación Popol Nah Tun (2011).
agrarian reform purposes, as they were national “fiscal” lands. However, the newly approved Municipalities law in its article 68 allowed local governments to sell and title national and ejido lands in their jurisdictions. This reform, which by the way did not last long – the changes to article 68 were reversed just three months after being approved –, did not include “fiscal” or national lands such as the CREM. Nonetheless, between January and May 1991 the Trujillo municipality sold these lands to local cattle ranchers, retired colonels and politicians for a grand total of less than $50,000, even though the state had paid $17 million for them less than a decade before. Two years later, in 1993, the Honduran congress requested the attorney general´s office to transfer the lands to the INA to be distributed among landless peasants. In practice, they remained underused and occupied by the illegal claimants until 2000.

The next time that the issue of these lands came up was in 1999, during the donors meeting that took place in Stockholm to discuss the post-Mitch reconstruction projects that each Central American country had and how they would be funded by the international community. According to almost everyone that I spoke to regarding these lands, during his speech in this meeting, Honduran President Carlos Flores Facussé mentioned that in Trujillo there were “fiscal” lands that would be used for the relocation of those left without homes after the hurricane.87

And thus the missing piece of the MCA puzzle came into place. By mentioning these lands in these terms, Flores Facussé had created the perfect opportunity for the Church and the INA to come together around a very concrete political project. The fact that these were “fiscal” lands meant that it entered within the legal framework of what the INA could do in terms of agrarian reform (see Chapter 4). Moreover, the connection with the housing crisis meant that it was easier to draw a line connecting the recuperation of these lands with the reconstruction

87 I have been unable to verify whether President Flores actually said this in his speech.
efforts, thus making more justifiable the active participation of the church. Let’s turn now to the process of organization of the movement.

**The prehistory of the MCA: from the hills and beyond to the coast of Trujillo**

If there seems to be a consensus on the status of the lands of the former CREM, the same cannot be said regarding the process of organization that led around 600 families to enter the lands of the former military base on May 14, 2000. The initial step taken was to start locating and organizing the families that would take part in the land recuperation. This was done collectively by the Church – specifically by Roque Jacinto, the coordinator of the *Socorro Jurídico* program –, the INA – with Román Valdés of Sonaguera taking a particularly active role – and the representatives of the national peasant federations (ANACH, CNTC, ACAN and to a lesser extent AHMUC and FECORAH). Using their different networks, particularly those of the Church’s delegates of the word, groups of landless peasants began to be organized all over the departments that were hardest hit by Mitch: Colón, Yoro, Olancho and Atlántida.

Initially, the requirement was to be poor and landless, but through a later process of “depuration,” those people who had been part of the cooperatives that had sold the land during the early 1990s were banned, which in practice meant giving preference to those families dwelling in the hills before Mitch.

These groups began to take part in meetings that began in late 1998, in which they would be informed of the history of the lands of the CREM and the peasant movement in the Aguán, the importance of collective work and of the need for a new agrarian reform, thus galvanizing a collective memory close to the one organized by the Jesuits (previous chapter) for the movement. In some cases, these groups were created on top of the CODELs, but in most cases, it was kinship and friendship ties which brought them together.

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88 National Association of Honduran Peasants (ANACH); National Rural Workers Central (CNTC); National Peasant Association (ACAN); Honduran Association of Peasant Women (AHMUC); and Agrarian Reform Cooperatives and Enterprises Federation (FECORAH).
For example, David, Mario and Roberto are brothers. Born and raised in the Department of Yoro, they arrived in Colón as kids in the early 1990s with their parents and settled in a community located in the hills just outside Trujillo. By the time Mitch crashed in, all three of them were married and living in different parts of the Aguán region. David worked as a construction worker in Tocoa. Mario – the youngest – was still living with his parents and Roberto was living in a neighboring community. With the hurricane Mario and Roberto, as well as their parents, lost their homes and lands and relocated temporally to David’s rented house in Tocoa. There, Esteban, the brother of Ana (David’s wife), who used to work in the INA, told them that they were organizing groups of poor peasants families to relocate in some national lands in Trujillo. This is how the three brothers, their parents and respective families became enrolled into the movement.

Once the groups were created, INA functionaries would help them organize into Empresas Asociativas Campesinas (EACs, literally Peasant Associative Enterprises) of between 10 and 30 families. These function very similarly to cooperatives, but do not fall under the cooperatives law. This was of course a requirement to become beneficiaries of the agrarian reform. However, as we will see later, the requirements and structure of this type of organization generated some frictions later on. Once the EACs were created, they had to enroll in one of the different national peasant federations and pay dues of around $50 (per EAC) to jumpstart and sustain the organization.

Once these groups were established, general meetings began to take place in Tocoa with representatives of the EACs from the different departments of the North Coast. During these meetings, logistics and other administrative topics were discussed and either on the 13th or the 19th – there is no consensus on this detail – of April, 1999, the founding committee was created, with representatives of the different national peasant federations. On May 10 the founding committee began to use all the means possible to let it be known that they intended to recuperate the lands of the CREM. And on June 4, 1999, they presented Delgado Fiallos with a
plan to recover those lands, which led the INA to carry out the first field inspection and to inquire into the legal status of the lands. However well-intentioned the INA director may have been, this process moved forward slowly, as the Institute was a heavily bureaucratic institution and many ministries were unwilling to help, something that has always been interpreted by the members of the MCA as proof of corruption.

After a year of waiting for the legal process to move forward, the group of organized EACs decided to take matters into their own hands and recuperate the lands of the CREM directly. By then, there were 40 organized and INA-recognized EACs, as well as various working committees that mirrored those of the CODELs, creating two parallel structures. By then, as one of the leaders of the community told me, they were “an organized peasant movement without land.” Initially, the idea was to enter the lands earlier in the year; however, they received word that the local cattle ranchers who had taken the land illegally were waiting for them with armed men. They moved back the date to the 14 of May.

On that day, or night rather, the organized families made the trip to the former CREM in around 50 trucks, buses and cars. All of the people involved remember that it was pouring rain that night. They also recall that the organizers assured them that there would not be any problems, that they would be welcomed and that there was some basic housing in the old barracks on the military base. This was not the case. As they approached the former CREM, they could hear bursts of AK-47 gunfire, as the guards of the cattle ranchers shot into the air to try to intimidate them. Emilio, whom we met in Chapter 2, remembers how his little daughters were scared and asked what was all that noise was, and that he told them that “...those are fireworks, they are welcoming us, they are happy to see us."

The soldiers guarding the gates to the former CREM put up a token resistance for a few minutes, but were quickly overwhelmed by the large numbers of people coming in. Once the first truck went past them, the rest followed and began unloading. There were no shelters to be found from the rain, and the families were forced to do the best that they could to put up nylon tents or
rustic lean-tos covered with wild palm fronds. This was the end of the journey, but it was just the beginning of their struggles.

**Organizing extraterrestrials: The birth of the MCA and the difficulties of carving out something new**

In one of my visits to Tegucigalpa I had the chance to speak with Laura. She is a middle-aged woman who had worked for the Tocoa PS during the late 1990s as part of the Socorro Jurídico program. Now a lawyer based in Tegucigalpa, she remembers well the discussions regarding the MCA that took place around the PS. During our conversation, I asked her opinion regarding the occupation. Her response was quite revealing: “The recuperation of the CREM was like bringing aliens [extraterrestrials] and dropping them in the middle of a field. Most of them did not know the place, did not necessarily know each other and definitely were not welcomed by the surrounding communities.” As we will see, this is a very apt way of characterizing the early history of the MCA.

As I mentioned, even before the peasant families entered the land they had created a set of commissions that mirrored those of the CODELs. These working commissions were: logistics, security, health, infrastructure, discipline, faith team (a sort of ecumenical space), production, sports and arts, legal affairs, education, information and propaganda and the women’s team. Each one of these working commissions had different tasks. For example, the logistics commission was in charge of obtaining enough food to feed all the families, the security commission was a sort of community militia in charge of doing guard duty and protecting the community from the constant harassment of the cattlemen’s guards and the police.

Below these commissions were the EACs, each of which elected its own board of directors as well as two representatives each for the movement’s general working commissions. Above the commissions there was the board of directors and the general assembly. The board of directors was composed of a member of each of the peasant federations present in the occupation (ANACH, CNTC and ACAN). The general assemblies were open to the public, but not
everyone had a vote; only one representative of each EAC (45), a member of each commission (12) and the members of the board of directors (3) could vote (a total of 60 votes).

It would be in such a general assembly that on the 18 of May – just 4 days after entering the lands – that the community would receive its name. There was a debate between two names: San Isidro, patron saint of the farm workers (santo patrono de los labradores), whose day is May 15 (one day after they entered the lands); and Guadalupe Carney, in honor of the U.S.-born Jesuit priest who dedicated his life to the peasant struggle and was disappeared by the Honduran military in 1983.\(^89\) After a close vote, the assembly chose to name the community after Guadalupe Carney. Two days later, on May 20, during another assembly, the question of how to present themselves to the outside world came up. After a long discussion in which different possibilities were presented, they decided to name their movement the Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MCA). One of the concerns mentioned regarding this name was that it could render invisible other struggles for land that were occurring then and that might occur in the future in the region. However, the idea that won was that this movement was of all the peasants of the valley, even when not all of them took part in the formal organization. Most importantly, from the perspective of the leadership closer to the Jesuits, the movement should aspire to influence and rekindle different agrarian struggles in the region.

During the early months, the atmosphere combined effervescence, fear and hope. There were daily general assemblies and the commissions were working hard trying to both survive and improve living conditions, with a particular focus on procuring basic services such as education and health. Everybody knew that entering the lands of the CREM did not immediately translate in an actual control of the 5,700 hectares that they were disputing.

\(^{89}\) Father Carney had disappeared while participating in an ill-fated guerrilla incursion from Nicaragua that was quickly crushed by the military soon after it crossed into Honduras. This probably also contributed to the elites’ hostilities to the peasant organization taking up his legacy (see Martínez 2006 for a characterization of the guerrilla, this period and the death of Father Carney).
remedy this situation, they moved in two directions. On the one hand, they began doing road blockades in front of their new home, which just happened to be the highway that connected the rest of the Aguán valley with the international port of Puerto Castillo. This stopped the flow of banana exports and aimed to pressure the government into regularizing their tenure over the recuperated land. On the other, the commissions organized occupation tours, in which all but a few of the men and women that were left to protect the main camp and the children would march together to one of the many properties into which the original lands had been chopped up during the 1991’s sale, take control over the plot, leave some people to defend it and move to the next one. This tended to be a dangerous, as in many cases the plots were protected by armed guards left by the erstwhile “owners.”

These practices had two main and contradictory effects. Internally, they helped strengthen the collective social bonds of the MCA, which was basically a group of quite diverse people who did not know each other well before the occupation of the CREM. In the process of recovering the different plots and working in the commissions they were literally producing unity and the organization. Externally, however, it was a whole different story. First, there was the animosity and virulent reaction of the local cattlemen, who also happened to be influential people in the political life of the nearby city of Trujillo. Second, just try to picture that you live in Trujillo or one of the nearby villages. All of a sudden, over 600 families appear out of nowhere, occupy a number of plots of land and begin staging road blockades and clashing with the armed guards and the police. Further, you start to hear in the media and in the streets that they are bunch of land usurpers and thieves — or tacamiche, a pejorative term used to refer to organized peasants in Honduras.90

90 It is hard to pin down exactly what tacamiche means and so far my attempts to track its historical roots have been unsuccessful. In general, it appears to refer to rebellious or insurrectionary peasants. For example, Brent Metz (2010:294), mentions that between the 1960s and 1990 local elites in Copán and Ocotepeque in Western Honduras, referred to “...Guatemalan Ch’ortí political refugees as tacamiche, or
This aura of danger and rejection around the newly created peasant community was heightened by the levels of violence that took place in the clashes between the MCA and the guards and police. For example, on July 27, 2000, there was a fierce clash with the guards of Henry Osorno, a former army colonel who claimed ownership over the former CREM lands. In a exchange of gunfire between both groups, Diógenes Osorno, Henry’s brother, was shot dead. Henry, an important figure in Trujillo, whose home stood as an affront on a hill in the middle of the lands claimed by the MCA, swore revenge, and tensions in the region were on the rise, to the point that the word in Tegucigalpa was that civil war had broken out in the Aguán (Falla 2000). In the end, the situation was brought somewhat under control with the intervention of a high-level commission named by the president himself, but as we will see later, this blood feud was far from over.

Some of the most painful memories that I heard from the people in Guadalupe Carney was related to this rejection by the surrounding communities during this period. Women, in particular, remember how in the hospital in the city of Trujillo – a 10- to 20-minute drive from their community – doctors and nurses would refuse to take care of patients that came from the “invasion” – as the Guadalupe Carney community was referred to. Moreover, according to people in Guadalupe Carney, pregnant women were not only refused service but told that it was better if those “little tacamiches die.” To go to Trujillo to buy supplies or access services such as

Also, in 1994, in a community called Tacamiche, between the cities of La Lima and El Progreso in Northern Honduras, a group of former workers of the Tela Railroad Company responded to the Company’s decision to close the plantation plots in that sector by occupying around 800 hectares of land. Their idea was to produce maize for self-consumption and to request that the INA give them the land. However, both the banana company and the state responded with repression, which in turn led to increasing resistance, as the CNTC mobilized its bases to protect what came to be known as the “Honduran Chiapas” (Posas 1995). This episode, one of the first big mobilizations after the approval of the LMA in 1992, probably added a new layer to the meaning of tacamiche, as it is usually attached to organized peasants connected to the agrarian reform. It is in this terms that the notion is used in the report of the Truth Commission (C.V. 2012).
health or education (from the beginning, there was a local school in the camp, but it initially covered only primary school) was deeply painful, since people would constantly hurl insults and call them murderers and thieves.

Danger and rejection tended to reproduce and exacerbate each other and had the effect of creating a subaltern identity by negation, in a process similar to that described by Ranajit Guha (1999:18) for the Indian colonial period: “...he [the subaltern] learnt to recognize himself not by the properties and attributes of his own social being but by a diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors.”

The more the peasants were rejected, the more they organized themselves to survive and the more friction this created with their hostile and alien surroundings. This solidified a particular identity as a community always in the struggle (siempre en la lucha). It also closely connected to their religious roots – remember that many of the members were former delegates of the word and that much of their support came from the PS – and they tended to relate their experience with that of the “chosen people” of Israel. For example, in the celebration of the thirteenth anniversary (2013) of the MCA, I saw a sign that freely paraphrased the Bible’s Exodus 19: 1-4: “They came down from the hills to make their tents, in honor of the lands for which GOD gave them the keys.”
In terms of gender relations, the process of organization was one of flux. Most of the MCA families came from the surrounding hills and were used to forms of subsistence based on self-provisioning, with little to no collective labor outside of the extended kinship group. Once they entered the CREM lands, they were forced to work together, both as part of the EACs and also because every pair of hands was needed to build the community. Women faced a double work load, as they continued to take care of most of the domestic chores at the same time that they took part in the organization’s working committees and many also worked in the fields shoulder to shoulder with men. Initially, and for a period of about two years, no one was allowed to work outside of the organization. This meant that most of the provisioning came from either their work on the land or the humanitarian aid they received through the Church in the form of a food for work program (I will return to this topic later). Thus, there was little money circulating in the community.
It is important to point out also that many single women took part in this occupation in an attempt to provide for their children and access a piece of land.\footnote{It is very common in Honduras’s rural areas for a man to leave his wife or partner and relocate somewhere else with a younger woman to repeat once more the pattern. The result is a significant number of single women who have to raise their children by themselves. The fact that gender plays such an important role in having access to land means that women have to constantly search for male companionship. The result is high levels of competitiveness between women that reinforces this form of almost nomadic masculinity.} This meant an even heavier workload, since to be a member of an EAC, it was necessary to work in the fields or in the committees. However, in most cases the women I spoke to remembered this period as one in which there was a lot of solidarity and spaces for women to work and spend time together. Chores such as carrying water, laundry, collecting wild vegetables and watching the children were done collectively, as their surrounding were seen as dangerous. Also, in a situation that I came to hear often in participants’ accounts of different peasant movements, the initial period of organization of struggle is remembered as one in which gender differences and inequalities were somewhat flattened. Women were allowed to participate freely in political activities and they considered important members of the organization. While most of the domestic work continued to fall on women, men became more active in doing chores such as looking after the children or cooking.

Finally, according to Casolo (2009:408–09), the claim that “women would not have sold,” carried over into the occupation, and including women within the whole process was seen as crucial. According to her,

Six months after the occupation, Guadalupe Carney’s leadership and representative assembly, at that time 95 percent male, cast a historic vote. They approved land rights and assembly membership for single women heads of households, joint title and assembly membership for both adults in the case of couples, and political education and skill-training workshops for families.
As we will see later on, the carrying over effect of these “changes” or decisions would not last long, as the gender pendulum would swing back in the other direction, once the organization managed to better consolidate its position on the ground.

**A tale of failed projects and incomplete solutions**

At the same time as the members of the MCA struggled to carve out a living space in the former lands of the CREM, they entered into a set of relations with other institutions. This was of course essential in their attempts to stabilize their position in the zone and be able to improve their living conditions. It is within the constellation\(^92\) or force field of these relations and how they were deployed that we can begin to understand the form that the MCA took.

I already mentioned the tense and volatile relation that the families of the Guadalupe Carney had with their surroundings. However, at the same time that these struggles organized the local scale, they were also enmeshed in networks of support and solidarity that operated on different scales. On the legal front, it was the movement’s strategy from the beginning to try to formalize their tenure over the land as quick as possible. When they embarked in road blockades, it was to pressure the government in this direction. The fact that the INA’s executive director was sympathetic to their pleas was important, as he visited the community on June 4, to discuss possible ways of resolving the issue. This was, however, a very slow and complex process, in which the different institutions involved did everything in their power to obstruct a movement that was seen as questioning the new agrarian property regime. Legal action against the government, with pressure in the streets and the plots was the strategy followed.

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\(^92\) I borrow here, and deploy freely, Theodor Adorno’s (1973:163) notion of the “constellation.” According to the German philosopher, in a constellation, “[t]he history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relations to other objects – by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge.”
The results of this strategy were mixed. It was effective in allowing them to get a more stable foothold in the lands that they were claiming. On October 12, President Carlos Flores Facussé visited the community to distribute the first nine definitive land titles and to commit to signing a decree to compensate the former “owners” for the land they lost. These two elements beg for further explanation. As I mentioned earlier, the former CREM lands had been chopped up and divided into individual and private plots in the 1991 sale. This meant that each one of these plots had a legal deed; in total there were over 40 plots. Receiving title to nine of these was, of course, an important event. As one former member of the MCA’s board of directors in this period reported, “with this we now felt that we had really settled down on the land.”

Compensation for the former owners was a much thornier topic. According to Honduran agrarian law, since these were “fiscal” lands, the state did not need to pay for them. However, it did have to pay for the “improvements” made on the land (here “improvement” means any sort of investment: trees planted, levees, buildings or other infrastructure constructed). The first problem was that once the President left the community he seemed to have forgotten his commitment to sign the executive decree. Thus, confirming that the relation between peasants and state is forever mediated by mobilization and conflict (Wolf 1969; 1966), 2001 began with the people from the MCA blockading the road again to remind the President of his commitments. These new blockades lasted around nine days and involved a few clashes with the police. This action led the President to sign executive decree 92-2001, which allocated nearly $2 million to pay for the improvements. However, according to members of the MCA’s board of directors of this period, half of that money was used by the INA to pay “institutional costs” and only 23 properties were legally transferred to the MCA.93 There was also the problem of how the improvements were calculated, as in the end the appraisals of the properties were hugely inflated. A peasant from the MCA, for example, recalled how in the evaluation of the

93 Eventually, in 2007, President Manuel Zelaya would distribute another 18 titles.
improvement on one of the plots, it was claimed that there were about $10,000 worth of lime trees, but in reality there were only two old trees that had not even been planted by the supposed owner. The question of the lands’ value has never been truly resolved, and it became an ever-present encumbrance on the organization, which has had to spend large amounts of money over the years on the legal battles.

On a more everyday level, the role of the Church was crucial. At the same time as the MCA struggled to legalize their situation on the lands, they also began creating the community of Guadalupe Carney and much of the work that went into this was bankrolled by international cooperation\textsuperscript{94} channeled through the Church. For example, one of the first things that needed to be done was clearing the land where the homes would be constructed and dividing it into the 45 sectors in which the EACs would settle. All of this work was done by the people of the community – both men and women – and financed through the program of work for food. The PS created two foundations (San Alonso Rodríguez in 1999 and Popol Nah Tun in 2003) to distribute and allocate the funds that initially were coming as part of the post-Mitch reconstruction process, but later also for particular development projects. In this way, from 2000 and until around 2006, the Guadalupe Carney community received a significant amount of funds in the form of productive projects or the like (see Cano 2010). These projects ranged from the promotion of crops such as rice or vegetables, to cattle grazing and the creation of small female-run and collectively-owned convenience stores. International NGOs or organizations would visit the community and support it in different ways. For example, through a project sponsored by an Italian organization, a youth and arts group was created, as well as a

\textsuperscript{94} Which in the U.S. is understood rather as “aid.”
community radio. Also, a “house of culture” was built using only local materials and taking advantage of a site of thermal waters, a small guest lodge was constructed.95

In most cases, people in the community today view these projects as failures. Rice was introduced as a cash crop, but this did not take into account how dry the lands were, the problems of installing irrigation systems, or the lack of markets where it could be sold. A chicken raising project was implemented, but the animals chosen were for modern farms and could not survive the harsh conditions of the settlement and died. The thermal waters lodge never attracted much tourism because it was not very well publicized and also, according to the people from Guadalupe Carney, visitors were scared of trying to stay there.

It is easy after reading this to conclude that here as elsewhere these sorts of development projects come from outside and above and do not really improve the living conditions of the poor (Ferguson 1990; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence 2007). Even more problematically, this sort of project created a patronage system in which the community came to rely heavily on funds and projects from outside, without much installed capacity left in the community. Once the cooperation agencies began to pull back in the mid-2000s, much of the organizational fabric began to unravel. The glaring absence of the state remained a constant, and one that continuously reminded the PS of their role as a parallel state and of the failure to construct active citizenship through the process of agrarian reform.

**Organizational tensions and the eventual crisis**

The MCA was organized around working commissions and a general assembly that were made up of members of the EACs. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the EACs and the movement were one and the same thing. Just as in the case of the cooperatives, the nucleus and

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95 There were also many projects that in the end were never developed. The most astounding one was the proposal, by a member of the PS, to install a maquiladora in the community to employ the young women. I heard an army colonel propose something similar as a way of resolving the current agrarian problems of the region.
principal objective of the EACs is production for consumption (need economy) and not necessarily political change or even political organization. In contrast, the MCA, as a result of the alliance between the peasant movement and left-oriented Jesuits, was supposed to be the beginning of a radical process of transformation in the Aguán, a spearhead of an agrarian reform process from below that would sweep away the old structures of domination in the region.

For EACs to be mobilized politically, however, something had to be missing in regards to their productive cycle (M-C-M'; as we saw in Chapter 3). In the case of the 45 EACs that formed the MCA, this was foremost land. The organization was understood as the necessary vehicle to access land and in turn, much of the unity of the movement rested on this aspiration. With this I am not trying to say that the only reason that the MCA existed was to access land, since the relationships that could be built around this access were also very important (work, education, health, housing, etc.) — a sort of agrarian citizenship, to use Wittman’s term (2009). My point rather is that the center from which the connections between EACs and MCA gravitated was precisely the issue of access of land, or rather its recuperation. This tended to create a disjuncture every once in a while when the more immediate issues came against a broader political understanding. Let me illustrate.

In the early days of the recuperation in 2000, the struggle to recover the land generated a high level of internal unity, as was clearly shown in the recuperation tours that the movement carried out. At that moment, unity came before anything else, because this was the most certain form of success and survival. At that time there was no clarity regarding how they would organize themselves to work the land. Simplifying a very complex set of internal discussions, we could say that in the end they had to decide between three different models of tenure and collective work. The first one was promoted by the INA. According to functionaries of the institution, the easiest and quickest way to resolve the issue was to push for a single land tittle for the whole 5,700 hectares and create a second-level cooperative – similar to COAPALMA – that would group together the 45 EACs. This model was rejected offhandedly because most of
the members feared that by having a single title, it would be easier for a few corrupt leaders to control everything and eventually sell the land. It is important to remember that most of the people in these EACs came from the hills and had a tendency to distrust any form of leadership above them, had very limited experience in political organizations and were not tend very open to the idea of collective work. Most members only knew the people that were part of their own EAC, and these tended to be organized around kinship and friendship ties, which also made it complicated to trust strangers. For example, David, Mario and Roberto, whom I introduced previously in this chapter, were organized into an EAC formed mainly by family members and neighbors of their home in the hills outside Trujillo and initially did not know anyone outside of this close circle.

The second alternative was to keep everything as a collective property until they managed to recover all of the land and then divide it in equal pieces between all of the EACs. This way unity and strength in numbers could be sustained. Finally, the third option was to organize a raffle that would define the order and location of the land that each EAC would receive; this was the option that won. This decision meant that the way in which the former CREM had been divided among the different cattlemen and retired colonels remained intact even after the MCA took control. It also meant that the sizes of the plots that each EAC would receive would be uneven, but also that what they would find growing on the land would be different. For example, some of the plots were planted with oil palms, while others only had thick bush. Because the lands were quite dry, location would make a world of difference in terms of income. It also meant that for the 23 EACs that received their land titles first, the incentive to join the struggle to recover the rest of the land destined for the remaining EACs diminished significantly. Finally, it also meant that some of the EACs, the ones that were favored by the raffle, would be able to begin working at once and for most of them this was the most important thing. Had they not joined the organization in search of a piece of land to work?
This tension between the political and the economic – between the EACs and the MCA – became even more evident after a significant amount of the external cooperation funding that the community received was cut off in the second half of 2005. From the beginning, the board of directors and the MCA’s structures – as the working commissions are known – were financed directly through external funds; EACs did not have to pay dues. Once the funds stopped coming in, various commissions – such as arts and sports – simply stopped functioning and the board of directors had a harder time getting its work done. The organization as a whole entered a crisis.

The situation worsened in 2008, when on the early morning of August 3 a group Henry Osorno’s armed guards fired upon a group of MCA peasants and detained a 13-year-old girl from Guadalupe Carney for around 30 minutes. The community responded first by calling the police, which told them that they could not intervene, and then by taking manners into their own hands. Around 300 people surrounded Osorno’s home, which is located on a hill in the middle of what used to be the CREM. The guards responded by firing into the crowd, killing one of the peasants, which in turn led to the MCA’s security team to fire back and close in on the house. It is not yet clear how, but the house went up in flames, with a final death toll of 11, including Henry Osorno himself and most of the people present in his house. This action can be seen as an illustration of what Guha calls the “modality of inversion”: “… a political struggle in which the rebel appropriated and/or destroyed the insignia of his enemy’s power and hoped thus to abolish the marks of his own subalternity” (Guha 1999:75).

After the “Casa Quemada” incident (burnt house) – as it is commonly known –, the levels of repression and persecution by the local police forces and armed guards of the MCA increased. Arrest warrants were issued against the leaders of the organization, whether they had been present at the shootout or not, which forced 18 of them to escape to Nicaragua for a few months until the tension subsided. This in effect decapitated the MCA as an organization, leaving most of the decisions to be taken either by the local representatives of the national peasant federations or the EACs themselves.
When the hills meet in the valley (1): between the political and the economic

What I call the tension between the political and the economic can be seen as a condensation of the contradictions between hill and valley that I have been discussing in the last 2 chapters. The people that made up the MCA were mainly peasant families that in the period prior to Hurricane Mitch had been dwelling in the hills that surround the valleys of the Aguán, Lean and Sula. With very few exceptions, due to the restrictions in the selection process (people who had been part of cooperatives that sold could not take part), they had no experience in collective enterprises such as EACs or cooperatives. They were used to producing staple crops such as maize and beans, using slash and burn agriculture, and had little experience in producing for the market. Once they joined the collective endeavor of the MCA and the Guadalupe Carney community, however, they were confronted with many of the forms of discipline that had created the tension between hills and valley in the first place (see Chapter 2).

Because much of the initial organization was done through the Church’s networks, with members of the PS very involved in the process, the MCA members borrowed forms of organization from these sources. For example, the process of selection and creation of the working commissions replicated how the CODELs were organized. At the same time, however, to be agrarian reform beneficiaries, they had to be organized as EACs. And, if we remember from the previous chapter, it was exactly against this type of organizing, and the forms of patronage and corruption that it engendered in the cooperatives, that the Jesuits created the ideas of the CODELs as a counterbalance.

This tension between hills and valley, took also a very particular form in relation to the palm oil assemblage. Scattered throughout the former CREM lands there were plots planted with oil palms. Initially this was seen as a nuisance rather than as a blessing by those who received this land. According to Emilio, this had to do with the fact that most of the people had never seen oil palms before, nor did they know how to work with them, as they had labored most of their life making milpa. He remembers that he himself did not know much about the crop but
that he met a guy that worked as a truck driver in San Alejo, close to El Progreso, where there are oil palm plantations. He asked him a few questions about how the work was done and he began cutting and collecting the fruit from scattered plants that could be found in the different plots. He remembers that at that time, the early 2000s he could leave the fruit bunches on the road with no fear that anyone would steal them. This lasted until the mid-2000s when more and more people came into contact with the crop, particularly by working as day laborers in the oil palm plantations that can be found close to the Guadalupe Carney. Once the members of the cooperatives were allowed to work outside of the community, the oil palm monoculture began moving quickly into the center of everyday life in Guadalupe Carney.

The fact that most of the productive projects financed with cooperation funds had failed meant that in the end the EACs were left with limited options. Those whom luck had rewarded with plots that had oil palms had the chance of a precarious existence as need economies, producing raw materials for one of the extraction mills located around the former CREM. For the rest, life became a complex combination of different sorts of activities, such as growing meager milpas – due to the poor quality of the soils – some form of meat or milk husbandry or selling grazing grass as animal feed. Others worked as day laborers on the oil palm plantations – owned by Miguel Facussé and René Morales – close to the community. In all of the cases, the limitations and problems for male youth, which I described in Chapter 3 in discussing the BPA cooperatives, remained. With very few opportunities to join one of the EACs as members, young men were also forced to look for work as day laborers. As I will mention shortly in discussing MARCA, these dynamics were deeply gendered.

For the peasants, this constellation of activities aimed at escaping poverty by retaining some control over the value they produce. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Honduran peasants refer to working for someone else’s benefit as “giving their lung.” This for them was the most important thing to avoid, however unavoidable it might turn out to be. The idea and necessity in many cases of having to work for Facussé or Morales, taking into account the infamous position
that these figures have in the peasants’ understanding of the region’s history is profoundly painful. The oil palm monoculture is understood as the only viable way out. If they can plant their own oil palms, then they do not have to give their lungs to the palm men, but can keep their earnings and improve their lives. According to this logic, land and labor could be mixed in a way that value is retained within the community. However, for this form of the labor theory of value to come alive, money capital is also needed to jumpstart the process of production. In contrast to the BAP cooperatives of the 1970s and 1980s, today it is nearly impossible for the new EACs to access enough credit or financial support to cover the initial high cost of an oil palm plantation. And here we come back to the failure of the externally financed productive projects and the lack of financial resources within the EACs.

At the end of the day, their fates seemed to be inextricably entangled with that of the oil palm monoculture. In the best case scenario – need economies producing raw materials for the palm men’s extracting mills – they are able to retain a larger fraction of the value they produce. However, as the case of COAPALMA shows, unless they are able to move up the production chain, it is unlikely that these enterprises would be able to eventually include the younger generation, which would be forced to continue working on the larger plantations or moving all together outside of the region.

It would seem that there is no escape from the oil palm monoculture. In the case of those EACs whose plots are covered in oil palms, the fruit must be sold for cash. Cash that then is distributed among the members so they can provide for their families. Oil palms, due to their productive process, exclude the possibility of combined farming; you either dedicate all of the available land to them, or you produce something else. In the cases of those EACs whose plots do not have oil palms, the incentive for collective labor is limited, as the different households’ provisioning depends more on wage labor in the neighboring oil palm plantations. With this process of monetization, the separation between paid and unpaid labor – with its deeply
gendered dynamic (described in the last 2 chapters) — begins anew. This is labor capture by other means.

The members of the Tocoa’s PS saw in the MCA and the Guadalupe Carney community a chance for rekindling the agrarian reform in the region. However, as much as they tried, they were unable – and maybe even unwilling – to manufacture an alternative to the oil palm monoculture. In practice, by following the organizational blueprint of the state – with its heavily disciplined cooperatives and EACs – the end result was a reenactment of the process of labor capture experienced by those families that arrived in the region in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the BAP. The context and specific conditions were different, of course, but the broad strokes were basically the same: impoverished peasant households, unused to the disciplines of collective and organized labor, and with life histories predicated upon movement and migration were turned into disciplined workers fixed to a specific place.

I will continue to develop this argument in the next section, as we move from the experience of the MCA, to that of another hills peasant movement: The Peasant Movement of Rigores.

**The Peasant Movement of Rigores: from poverty in the hills to poverty in the valley**

The Peasant Movement of Rigores (MCR) is centered near the community of the same name on the Aguán’s left bank, about 30 minutes by car from Sonaguera, and about 40 minutes from Tocoa. To get there, you have to go past the village of Rigores until you reach a large Guanacaste tree. Known by the people of the neighboring village as either the Guanacaste Colony or as the “invasion,” the official name that the families that live there give to the community is *Nueva Vida*, or new life.

The history of the area in which the village of Rigores is located is tied up with that of natural disasters in the region. According to some of the earliest dwellers, before 1974 the zone was covered with trees and thick bush, with just a few scattered houses and no road to speak of.
This began to change in the aftermath of Hurricane Fifi in late 1974. It seems that Rigores was the closest area to the Aguán river on its left bank that was not flooded after the hurricane and many of the people who lived closer to the river and either were rescued or managed to escape on their own, ended up in this place. Refugees flocked to the community and began building houses and occupying land to make milpa. For those who arrived later or were unable to gain access to these lands, the journey continued up into the hills, where they repeated the patterns of the migratory agriculture that I have discussed in previous chapters.

Sometime in this period, several cooperatives affiliated with FECORAH were created in the region, but they never received support to shift to oil palm production, since they were from the left bank and part of the “outside” cooperatives that I discussed in chapter 3. The soil in the area is very hard and dry and not particularly fertile, which meant that production was never a lucrative activity. In the case of the cooperative Unión Rigores – located exactly where the MCR was to later be founded – the 41 members planted a few hectares of milpa and tended to rent their land out to local cattle ranchers for grazing. The members of the cooperative did not live on their lands, but in the neighboring village of Rigores.

Around 1996 or 1997, a group of poor peasants took advantage of this situation – absent owners and seemingly idle land – and invaded the 662 hectares assigned to the cooperative. Unable to recover their lands, Unión Rigores decided to sell them to a local cattleman, Federico Rivera. According to Macías (2001), the sale was for around $250,000, however, among the people in the community I heard of prices as low as $10,000, and according to Juan, a lawyer who later worked for the MCR, the land sold for around $45,000, which was the amount the cooperative supposedly owed in loans to the state. Juan also asserted that the sale was signed solely by the secretary – which is illegal – and was never sanctioned by the INA – which is also illegal.

According to Luis, one of the founders of the MCR, it was around this time that they began discussing the possibility of occupying these lands. But it would not be until the aftermath
of Mitch in late 1998 — when many people from the community and the surrounding area lost their crops and lands — that they would move forward to take the land. Unlike what we saw in the case of the MCA, the members of the MCR were not initially organized in EACs. However, there are two contradictory versions regarding the initial organization of the movement.

On the one hand, according to Luis, they were simply around 70 families from the village of Rigores and its surroundings or from across the Aguán River in the right bank community of Las Mangas, who had all been left landless and homeless by Mitch. In contrast to the MCA, they did not receive any support whatsoever at the beginning, which in part reflected in the lack of a more formal and legal organization before entering the lands. Moreover — and also unlike the MCA — the MCR lacked a coherent narrative about how the lands had been illegally acquired and why the movement had the legal right to occupy them. In this case, and Luis was quite adamant about it, they entered into the lands “a punta de huevos” – literally by “pure balls” – because they were hungry and needed that land.

On the other, according to Juan’s account, the initial movement was organized by 30 to 35 former members of Unión Rigores, who were against the sale and wanted to recover what they deemed had been taken illegally from them. To increase their number, they began to let people in and it is here where people like Luis fit into Juan’s narrative.

Juan’s version is more pervasive than Luis’s among both members of the MCR and of the peasant movement. What is important to point out is that here, as in the case of the MCA, the possibility of making a claim about the illegality of the previous acquisition of the lands was crucial. Peasant organizers and leaders in Honduras generally understand that for a successful land recuperation you need two things: pressure on the land – actually occupying it – and a plausible legal claim. The legal claim, moreover, must be articulated within a particular semantic framework, “...a common language or way of talking about social relationships that sets out the central terms around which and in terms of which contestation and struggle can occur” (Roseberry 1994:361).
In the case of the Honduran peasantry, this common language has to be that of the agrarian reform legislation and tradition. This, of course, explains the centrality of focusing on national or former agrarian reform lands and the meaning that is given to the notion of “recuperating,” as against occupying land. It also speaks to the political tradition inaugurated during Carías regime of respecting private property above everything else, with the state – the military, really – as its fundamental guarantor.

This harks back at the discussion of how more institutionalized historical narratives are woven and selected from among different individual memories and experiences (Portelli 2010). It also points to the importance of exploring how understandings of the past are created in particular contexts and in relation to particular political objectives (Trouillot 1995). For example, Luis’s interpretation of the beginnings of the movement is based on a rather masculinized version of the labor theory of value, according to which land belongs to those who need it and can claim it. This form of legitimizing property is quite generalized among peasants, but would not be very useful in court. Juan’s interpretation, on the other hand, reconstructs the situation rather from a legal standpoint, close to what the agrarian law would see as a legitimate claim on the land. Also, it is a version closer to the Jesuit template that I presented in the previous chapter.

This is not to say that one is “true” and the other “false,” but rather to indicate that historical narratives and truths are always manufactured in the present and reflect the political necessities present at that moment. There might come a time when the need for legal legitimation of the origins of the movement will no longer be needed and then Luis’s interpretation might circulate more freely. In any case, my own research has led me to believe that what probably happened was something in between, that they did not have legal advice initially, and that hunger and poverty were the true and only motors behind the organization and commitment to entering the land.
Where there is a clear consensus is that on May, 23, 2000, at around 2 a.m. – about a week after the MCA entered the lands of the former CREM –, 60 to 70 families entered the 662 hectares of the former Unión Rigores cooperative. The first thing they did once they entered the land was to clear the land and begin planting two hectares of watermelon and four of milpa. At this time, they were working collectively and as a single group. Also around this time they received support from a small national peasant federation called the National Diversified Peasant Federation of Honduras (FECADEH), which put them in contact with some lawyers. According to Juan, these lawyers presented a claim in the INA against Federico Rivera, the man who had bought the lands of Rigores. However, in contrast to the case of the MCA or, as we will see later, of MARCA, the claim was not against the illegality of the ownership of the land, but rather that Rivera was violating the agrarian law’s 500-hectare land ceiling. They began organizing the families into six EACs to claim possession of anything over that ceiling, which in this case were the 163 hectares over the 500-hectare ceiling.

The INA vowed to begin an investigation, but according to Juan, the institution, “as usual,” delayed the process, giving Rivera enough time to split up the property and divide it among three different people, thus eliminating the problem of the land ceiling. The decision to target the land ceiling was risky. On the one hand, it made the legal process easier, as the limit on the amount of land that a single person could have was clearly specified in the agrarian reform legislation. On the other hand, as it meant legitimizing Rivera’s ownership over the other 500 hectares of land.

At the same time that this was happening on the legal front, the families that had entered the lands were constantly harassed by both Rivera’s guards and the police. According to Luis, they were evicted every other day or so, for a total of 17 evictions. However, these evictions tended to be non-violent, as the police would come and tell them that the land was not theirs and that they had to leave. They would pick up their things, move to the village of Rigores and once the police left, they would enter again. Sometimes the evictions would be much more
violent and a few times, some of them, including Luis, would be taken by the police for a few hours and then left free. This dynamic had an effect that was probably sought by both the police and Rivera: to delay the situation, giving Rivera some time to split up the land and wear down the would-be occupiers without leading to an all-out confrontation.

The second wave of migration and the revival of the movement

It is not clear exactly how long this dynamic lasted. However, around 2002-2003, the number of families involved had dwindled to 15 or 20. Because of the harassment and the fact that many had houses in the nearby village, most of the members stopped living on the lands they were trying to recuperate; this of course made maintaining a foothold on the property ever more difficult. It is also around this time that they changed lawyers. The new lawyer was named Obdulio Fuentes, and he began to speed up the process of obtaining legal personality (personería jurídica) for the EACs and registering them as legal entities with the INA. Fuentes also presented a new claim against Rivera, this time alleging that he was not using the land productively.

Fuentes, however, ended up being more of a nightmare than a blessing for the peasants, as he tried to milk as much money as he could from them and continued to delay the process, to the point that eventually the INA dismissed the uncultivated lands claim. Just when it became evident that with him the process was going nowhere, he sold two of the EACs legal entities to another group of peasants who barged in and managed to take hold of around 200 hectares of the best lands.

While this was transpiring in the legal area, the few families still engaged in the occupation began looking to attract new members, as a way of strengthening the movement and making it more difficult to evict them. This was done mainly through kinship ties: someone is family of someone who is a friend of someone who is looking for land. If previously most of families came from the neighboring villages, in this case most came from farther away, mainly from the hills surrounding Sonaguera. Most were migrant families from the western region of
the country – mainly Copán – who had been part of the phased migration into the hills of the Aguán (see chapter 2) and who had either lost their lands to Mitch in 1998 or found themselves in a position in which they could not hold onto lands up the hills.

To explain this second point, I need to make a brief pause and go back to January 10, 1974. On this date, and as part of the reforms pushed forward by the military government, the Honduran Forestry Development Corporation (COHDEFOR) was created. With the founding of this institution, the state claimed ownership over all national forests, no matter what their legal status was. The idea was to create fiscal income in this way and thus promote national development. However, COHDEFOR never received enough resources to fully carry out its mandate. In the early 1990s, with the passing of the LMA, the situation changed somewhat, as the property of forestry resources was returned to the legal owners of the land, but with heavy restrictions on their exploitation. It is in this period that most of the conflicts between hillside communities and COHDEFOR began (for the case of the eastern region of the country, see Munroeaic, Southworth, and Tucker 2002; Tucker 2008).

Castro (1994:144), for example, mentions that by the mid-1990s, the agrarian frontier in the Aguán was almost totally occupied, which led to families to move even further up the mountains. But “...this also meant the risk of eviction by the Honduran Forestry Development Corporation (COHDEFOR).” These restrictions become even stronger after Mitch, when the inflow of cooperation funds would give the Corporation enough funds for the first time to fully enforce its norms (McSweeney 2005).

This was, for example, the case with Gonzalo, whose story we began in Chapter 2. We left his story when he was living with his parents and wife in the mountains above Sonaguera in the small community of Lorencito. By the late 1990s, his parents had already left to live in Sonaguera, due to their advanced age and the lack of social services in the mountains. He also told me that he was beginning to feel tired from all the hard work and scant output that he could get up in the hills. This led him to decide to sell the land he had (six hectares or so), but this
proved impossible. According to Gonzalo, the land registry office refused to recognize his rights to this land, because it contained forest that could not be touched, and thus he could not work on it, nor sell it. It never became clear to him why this happened, but it very likely had to do with COHDEFOR’s enforcement. Gonzalo also told me of another person who lived close to him and who began to double the usual wage rate for bringing down the forest found in his property and thus managed to keep his land and use it as he pleased.

Gonzalo eventually decided to abandon his plot in the hills and move to Sonaguera with his elderly parents. There he heard from a friend of his father in law, who also used to live in the hills, that there was a group of peasants that had already won some land and that was seeking new people to enroll. This is how he first learned about the occupation that was taking place in Rigores. He went to visit and liked the lands and the community, although he was surprised to see that no one was living on the recuperated lands. He went back to Sonaguera, picked up his family and moved to Rigores.

**Creating a community from scratch: the creation of the Nueva Vida**

With the arrival of these new families, the situation began to change. Most of them were younger families with more energy, and since they did not have a house in the nearby village to fall back on, they had more to lose and greater resolve. This created frictions from the beginning. First of all, the “new” families – as they called themselves – felt that only those that were residing permanently in the occupied lands should be members of the EACs and the movement. This led to some of the “old” members who were still in the organization to leave the movement; in 2013, there were only about five “old” families left.

A second tension was between Nueva Vida (New Life) – the MCR community – and the nearby village. Everything seems to have been good and merry when the people involved in the recuperation were also tied by kinship and friendship to the people who lived in the village of Rigores. Things changed as more and more unknown families, many with clear indigenous background, began to pour in and settle. It is around this time that the community began to be
dubbed “the invasion.” People describe these early years much as those in Guadalupe Carney talked about their own initial period, though the levels of physical confrontation and repression were less in Nueva Vida than in Guadalupe Carney.

With the arrival of this second wave of immigrants things also began to improve, or at least consolidate. The San Alonso Rodríguez Foundation (FSAR) – one of two foundations the PS created to channel cooperation funds into the region – began working with the community sometime around 2002. The Foundation began providing basic construction items and trying to promote diversified forms of agricultural production (a subject we will return to later). They also hired Juan in 2003, a Ceiba-based lawyer, to come in and try to resolve the situation in favor of the MCR. It is also around this time that people from Nueva Vida began to hear that Rivera was requesting a new and more definitive eviction of the community.

According to Juan, most of 2004 was spent in negotiations, trying to get Rivera to sell the lands to the INA, which in turn could assign them to the EACs. After the approval of the LMA, this had become the only way in which the INA could intercede in favor of peasants if the land was private property, as the possibility of expropriation was eliminated in the new law. This meant that after the courts had rejected the claims presented against Rivera, agrarian reform via the market was the only way to go.96

As part of the process, the INA sent a commission to assess the land and valued it at close to $650,000, a price that Rivera, who had bought it for less than a tenth of that price, eyed approvingly. However, according to Juan, the sale fell through because the functionaries from INA that presented the offer to Rivera asked for a kickback for enabling the deal. Federico Rivera would not have any of it and backed out.

96 It is important to remember that at this period in time market-led agrarian reforms were on the upswing in Central America, as well as in many other parts of the world (Lahiff, Borras Jr, and Kay 2007).
With the breakdown of the negotiations, Rivera became more intransigent, calling openly for an eviction and threatening the people from the MCR with guns. The conflict began to escalate, reaching a peak in April 2005, when two leaders of the MCR – Santos Aguilar and Odilio Acosta – were gunned down by unknown killers in the village of Rigores. It was not too hard to point the finger at Rivera, who died not long after the killing, and at his son Eric Rivera, who continued pushing for either an eviction of the MCR or a payment of around $5 million.

**Executive Decree 18-2008**

I mentioned earlier that on March 31, 2008, little more than a year before being ousted by the military, President Manuel Zelaya signed executive decree 18-2008. It is worth digressing here for a minute to expand the discussion of that measure. The signing of this decree resulted from pressure by peasant movements on the ground combined with increased levels of agrarian conflict in the countryside (Ríos 2014). Some of the most relevant aspects of the decree were: to make an inventory of agrarian law cases that had been pending for at least two years in the INA, the National Agrarian Council (CNA) or the Supreme Court; to acquire those lands that were not subjects of pending agrarian law cases, but that were occupied by peasant families; the issuing of close to $36 million in agrarian debt bonds to compensate owners for these lands; and, allowing the INA to expropriate in those cases in which the disputed property was proven to be national land. The decree also created a special commission to provide follow-up and enforcement.

The decree had a twofold effect. On the one hand, the reaction by the large landowners was of total rejection, both legally – with the Honduran National Federation of Farmers and Cattlemen (FENAGH) questioning the decree’s constitutionality in the Supreme Court, which led to its repeal after the coup97 – and politically, with a steep increase in the levels of violence.

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97 The action of unconstitutionality by the FENAGH was based on ten points of which I will mention four to illustrate. First, that the commission created violated the principle of equality, as the landowners only had one representative, while the peasant sector had at least three votes. Further, according to the FENAGH, the fact that in many cases the peasants were usurpers of land would make them a “privileged
against peasant communities. In the Aguán, as the epicenter of much of the conflict in this period, we find various examples, but I will mention just two. First, the increasing harassment of Henry Osorno against the MCA, which eventually led to the Casa Quemada incident in August, 2008. Also, the gunning down of the MCA leader Irene Ramírez, on June 11, just one day after he spoke in a local radio station in Trujillo in favor of the implementation of the 18-2008 in the former lands of the CREM.

On the other hand, the decree fueled the dreams of many peasant communities and movements that saw it and President Zelaya more generally as manifestations of a commitment to them that had been lacking since at least the 1970s and as providing the possibility of, at last, receiving legal access to lands for which they had been struggling for almost a decade. This came to seal a political alliance between Zelaya’s government and the peasant movement, and also reflected a growing sentimental bond between those families involved in the movement and the figure of Zelaya.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{98}This was of course not only the result of the passing of this decree. It had to do with a set of populist policies that came to reshuffle much of the patronage system and improve the living conditions of the poorest in very concrete ways. For example, when the country entered the Venezuela bankrolled Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), the Venezuelan government donated trucks and agricultural machinery that was distributed among the peasant movements. For example, in the case of Rigores, they received two trucks.
It seems impossible, or at least inappropriate, to suggest a direct correlation between Decree 18-2008 and the ousting of Zelaya on June 28, 2009. However, it is impossible to deny that the decree constituted a breaking point, one in which the stakes were raised and the stage set for even higher levels of confrontation. A clear example of this took place just five days before the coup. On June 23, 2009, at around 1:50 in the afternoon, Fabio Evelio Ochoa, the UD’s major candidate of Tocoa, was returning home after an interview at a local TV station in which he spoke in favor of the controversial “fourth ballot box.” A group of gunmen opened fire on the Ford pick-up truck in which he was traveling. He received a bullet to the head, another to the back and two more in his left arm. He survived miraculously, albeit with severe brain damage.

The attempted murder of Ochoa condenses most of the tensions and contradictions linking the Honduran agrarian crisis with the national political one. As a member of the UD, he was one of the main organizers behind the popular consultation or “fourth ballot box” vote that was to take place on June 28th; as leader of the Aguán-based popular organization COPA (to which I will refer more in a moment), he had been a vocal advocate for Decree 18-2008 and for MUCA – a movement we explore briefly later in this chapter – against Miguel Facussé and his Dinant corporation. This dispute concerned lands that Facussé seized illegally during the 1990s agrarian counter-reform.

99 The “fourth ballot box” (cuarta urna) was a vote that was supposed to take place on June 28, 2009, the day of the coup. The objective was to ask the population’s opinion regarding the possibility of convening a constituent assembly to rewrite and transform the 1982 constitution. For the sectors opposing Zelaya, this was seen as a clear sign that he wanted to reinstitute presidential reelection and remain in power beyond the end of his presidential term in 2009. It is known as the fourth ballot box because initially the idea was to place an extra ballot box – besides the ones for presidential, legislative and municipal elections – for people to vote in this regard. However, due to the pressure against the inclusion of this extra ballot box in the national elections, Zelaya decided to detach it from the national elections and turn it into a non-binding poll, to see whether people agreed or not with the idea of a new constituent assembly.
For the case of the MCR, Decree 18-2008 had been received as a blessing, as their case had been included on the priority list. However, as I indicate later in this chapter, the coup would come to shut this door. In any case, the struggles around the Cuarta Urna and Decree 18-2008, show vividly the connection between local and national conflicts and the way in which what would appear to be an isolated and relatively small movement, such as the MCR, was deeply entangled with other events taking place elsewhere. It also serves as a good corrective to the dominant way in which the coup has been approached, as abstracted from the agrarian dynamics of the country.

*When the hills meet the valley (2): organization and production*

In this section, I describe how collective work operates in the EACs and some of the tensions that it creates. This is, in effect, a second part of “when the hills meet the valley,” because much of that discussion is also applicable to the MCA case. First, just as in the case of Guadalupe Carney, the basic unit of spatial organization in the Nueva Vida community is the EACs (six in this case). There are six quadrants or sections, one assigned to each EAC. Each section is divided into a set of house plots, one for each family. Just as in Guadalupe Carney, these plots have a size of 1 manzana (0.75 hectares). I would argue that the decision to keep this size, instead of something smaller that would give them more collective space for the EAC’s cultivation plots, is a reflection of the background of many of the families, used to living scattered either in the hills surrounding the Aguán or back in the more mountainous lands of Copán.

The cultivation plots are separated from the residential area. Here again, they were divided into six sections and each EAC can split it up and use it as it pleases. There can be some variation in this regard between the EACs. For example in Guadalupe Carney, there were some which had so little land or else the whole plot was covered by oil palms, so the EAC members preferred to work the whole extension collectively. In other cases all the assigned land was split into individual plots without leaving any collective land. The MCR’s EACs were a combination of both, which seems to be the norm in the Aguán for EACs or cooperatives not solely dedicated to
oil palms. Here, each member is assigned an individual working plot, usually between 0.75 and 1.5 hectares, to do with as they please. A larger section is kept and worked collectively. In most cases in the Nueva Vida community, families would plant milpa, beans, plantains and cassava in their individual plots. In the collective ones there would be some combination of these staple crops and more commercially oriented ones, such as citrus trees. In 2014 they were also preparing to plant some oil palms (a topic I will return to later). With the support of the FSAR, they have also been creating demonstration plots with more diversified production, including vegetables, watermelons and other fruits. Because of the lack of irrigation – there is no running water, nor electricity – and the constant threat of evictions, people tend to cultivate seasonal, rather than permanent, crops.

In terms of labor, the most common formula is a division of the working days. Each member has to work three days a week in the collective plots under the supervision of the EAC’s work coordinator, who is selected for this task by the general assembly. The other three days, the members can do as they please and either work in their individual plots or look for wage labor outside the community. If a member is unable to attend one of the collective workdays, he can either send a representative – usually a son or a brother – to cover for him, or he can pay the EAC a flat rate for the day. Work in both the individual plots and the collective ones tends to be done my men or their sons. Only in the cases of single women did I find women working the fields, since as I mentioned before, this is a requirement for becoming and remaining a member of the EAC. Just as in the case of the MCA this meant a double workload and even a third load for the women who, in addition to being members of an EAC, are also the teachers at the community’s primary school. This logic and practice of land to the tiller,\textsuperscript{100} which is so ingrained within the Honduran peasantry, places severe restrictions on single women. For example, I met

\textsuperscript{100} I characterized this logic in Chapter 2. The idea is that to have access to land you must work on it. As Esther Roquas (2002) shows, this reflects a clear gender bias, as women – due to the traditional division of labor – tend not to labor in the fields.
a woman whose EAC’s board of directors would not allow her to have a boyfriend, because this would mean that if they ever got married, that he would also have rights to the land.

Further, particularly in the poorer EACs, women are expected to do exactly the same type of farm work as men, no matter their particular condition. I learned of a case in another peasant movement, where a 15-year-old woman, who had inherited the membership rights from his deceased father, was forced to do heavy labor in the fields into her seventh month of pregnancy. She ended up losing her baby and came close to losing her own life. When I discussed this situation with other men from the community, they would say that it was really sad, but what could they do? As one of them said, “I am not going to enslave myself just so that she can be relaxed. She should have a man to take care of her.” We see here again the generalized and very ingrained assumption that land ownership is necessarily a male-centered issue.

Virtually all EAC members engage in some form of wage labor in the oil palm or citrus plantations near the community. I mentioned that there was not much cash circulating in Guadalupe Carney; this is even more so in the case of the Nueva Vida. In general, none of the productive activities that take place in the community produce any sort of monetary surplus. The few sales of maize and plantains, moreover, are to local “coyotes” or intermediaries, who pay significantly under the market price. This makes employment as day laborers, or as permanent workers in the case of many of the sons of members who cannot become members, a necessity for almost all males. For women, the situation is also constrained. They are all but tied to their homes and domestic work and have very few options for social mobility. In Nueva Vida, unlike in Guadalupe Carney, access to education is very limited. The options for teenage girls are to either help with the domestic chores or search for very badly paid work as domestic help in neighboring villages. The only exception I found was a family led by an exceptional woman, who worked all her life in the fields, but managed to see her four daughters through school. Two of them were the community’s teachers.
The land to the tiller principle collapses here, since actual practice is to provide land to men. Within this property regime – understood as the formal and informal norms and practices that regulate property relations –, the only way to access land is through labor in the fields. Women’s access to land was thus mediated either by a working partner or by taking on the double workload as a sort of surrogate man. This places severe restrictions on women’s autonomy and forces them to navigate a very complex social landscape. Gossip is always directed at single women and especially at those who are forced or decide to do things in a different way from the norm. Other forms of violence are also used to keep them in line. The EACs try to control women’s personal life in terms of who they see or go out with. Single women are constantly harassed by their supposed colleagues in the EACs and cooperatives, who tell them that they are going to be thrown out unless they have sexual relationships with them.

Laura, a 30-year-old single mother of five and member of one of MARCA’s EACs, told me how in her early days in the Enterprise, she found out that there was a wager going around to see who would be the first one to seduce her and take her to bed.

Further, even on those cases were women could have access directly to land, their capacity to exploit it was limited, as they could only rely on their close kinship relationships – usually a brother or an older son – to pool the extra labor necessary to work their individual plots and participate in the sessions of collective labor of the EACs, as well as taking care of their traditional domestic tasks.

All of these elements position women in very particular places within their communities and in relation to land. Here, land is not only a resource, but as we can see, a thick knot of social relationships that link men and women with each other, but also with much broader processes, such as the monetization of subsistence and the oil palm monoculture.

**Enter the monoculture: the lure and barriers of the palm oil assemblage**

The EACs of the MCR recently initiated an effort to cultivate oil palms commercially. The case of the MCR is very revealing, as it shows the different layers of complexity that the articulation
with the oil palm assemblage involves. First, it is worth thinking about the centrality that the oil palms have in a community that does not produce them and is mainly populated by families that did not know about them before they arrived there.

One day, I was chatting with a group of kids (around 8 to 12 years old) about Nueva Vida. I asked them what was it that they felt that their community had that could not be found anywhere else. One of the kids responded negatively, “It has no light [electricity], no running water and no palm trees.” This is for me one of the best examples of the sort of overlap that exists in the minds of many residents of these communities between oil palms and wellbeing or development. It is striking — and not uncommon in the Aguán — that such modern promises as electric energy and running water are conflated with oil palms (for a similar argument for South East Asia, see Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011).

To understand how this comes about, we can begin with the sort of contrasts that are articulated around the palm trees. First, recall the discussion in chapters 2 and 3, where I noted that the development of the palm oil industry in the region was one of the main objectives behind the state’s promotion of the BAP. This translated into a significant amount of investment in both infrastructure and the creation of plantations. All of this past labor had the effect of creating an uneven geographical development in the Aguán manifested in the tensions that I described in those chapters, fundamentally the ones between hills and valley and between the left and right banks of the Aguán River. When we look at the Nueva Vida community, it is located in the left bank and most of its inhabitants come from the hills. From this perspective, the most immediate difference between their poverty and the less severe poverty of other communities nearby is the lack of oil palms.

This differentiation is lived in a much more everyday form, particularly for the youth. The road that passes in front of the community goes to one of Facussé’s more important and infamous palm oil plantations, Finca Panamá. This means that Nueva Vida residents see every day the workers passing by to or from their work on the plantation, riding motorcycles, using
their smartphones or talking about what they are going to do with the money they earned. This proximity to Finca Panamá creates other contradictions, since at the same time that the oil palms are seen and indirectly experienced as a means to a better life, they are also understood as a dangerous place and a place of death. Several disappearances and murders have taken place among those oil palms, involving the private security guards that patrol the plantation.

The oil palm has to be understood within a social field that is organized by both these forms of attraction and the barriers that limit and condition how the different communities can enter in relations with the palm oil assemblage. I would argue that both the lure and the barriers are fundamental to understanding what I term the movement of the oil palm monoculture to the core of everyday life in the Aguán. In fact, part of the reason why this lure is so strong has to do with how hard it actually is to enter the palm oil assemblage as producers for these EACs. As we saw in chapter 3, the initial operating costs are quite high and there is no production of fruit for at least two years. For a community as poor as Nueva Vida, pooling enough resources in each EAC to buy the seeds has been a big struggle. The fact that they are unable to obtain credit and that there is no state support for palm production by smallholders is just one of the barriers that they have to confront.

Another barrier to take into account has to do with acquiring seeds or seedlings and the certification of the oil palms. There is a whole sector of the palm oil assemblage that has to do with the growing and selling of seeds and seedlings to jump start production. There are, of course, different types of seeds and types of palms available, with quite significant differences in the prices. These differences do not have to do as much with the levels of production, but with the quality of the fruit and of the oil that can be extracted. The EACs obviously had to buy the cheapest seeds available, which will ultimately have an effect on the quality of their output.

In 2003-04 an international organization called the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil Production (RSPO) was created. According to Adrienne Johnson (2012:3),
The RSPO’s objective is to ‘increase synergies’ ... between palm oil production, environment and livelihoods. Beginning in 2003 in Southeast Asia, this institution has sought to create a space for commercial interests (e.g. Unilever, Cargill) to negotiate with representatives of local actors, especially farmers, and cooperatively devise production regulations to ensure socially and environmentally-sound production.

In the 10 years since its creation, the RSPO has been pushing for criteria that would be needed to have a plantation or mill certified. Although the coverage of this form of certification is still limited, as very few companies and countries have fully embraced it, in the future it might have a significant impact on the palm oil assemblage, particularly in light of the criticism that the industry receives regarding the environmental and social costs of oil palm production. In regions like Central America, were most of the production is for domestic or regional markets, this form of certification would probably give rise to a two-tier market, in which certified palm oil, with its requirements of higher investment, would go to the export and regional markets, while non-certified oil would be left for domestic markets, driving down prices and living conditions for the producers in the latter sector (see Galt 2014 for the case of horticultural production in Costa Rica).

While there are several requirements to become certified through RPSO, I will just mention two that apply particularly to the case of the MCR’s EACs. First, the RSPO Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Production Criterion 2.2 reads: “[t]he right to use the land can be demonstrated, and is not legitimately contested by local communities with demonstrable rights.” And one of the indicators is “Documents showing legal ownership or lease, history of land tenure and the actual use of the land.”

This criterion is, of course, full of good intentions. According to Johnson (2012:10), With land registration and proof of land ownership, it is believed that no other third party – individual, company or community – can contest the rights to one’s land. This will lead to smooth relations with surrounding communities and ultimately a problem-free plantation
environment.” This, of course, is a steep requirement for a community such as the Nueva Vida, where the dispute over land is longstanding and complex.

According to RPSO criterion 4.7, in the plantation “An occupational health and safety plan is documented, effectively communicated and implemented.” What this means is that workers must use the correct gear and have received training in the handling of the chemicals used on the plantation. This again reflects noble intention, but it effectively blocks smallholders, such as those in Nueva Vida, from certifying their production.

This is not the place for a fully fleshed out critique of the certification process in the palm oil assemblage (but see Johnson 2012; Schouten and Glasbergen 2011; World Rainforest Movement 2010). What I am interested in pointing out is how this sort of regulation that operates on broader scales articulates with the concrete reality of the particular sites where the palm oil assemblage has taken hold. In the case of Nueva Vida, we can see the sort of tensions that are created between the lure of the oil palm as a symbol and materialization of such things as electricity, running water or motorcycles and the barriers that structure and condition the community’s articulation with the palm oil assemblage.

**MARCA: righting the wrongs of the past and carving out a space within the oil palm monoculture**

By looking at the history of the MCA and the MCR we have been moving so far along a thread that links the hills with the valley. In both cases, the great majority of those families involved in the land recuperations came from the hills surrounding the nearby valleys and had no previous organizing experience within the reform sector. It would be a mistake, however, to think that all of the movements that sprouted in the aftermath of the agrarian counter-reform followed this pattern. Already in 1996 – two years before hurricane Mitch crashed into the Honduran north coast – a group of former members of three cooperatives (El Despertar, San Esteban and La Trinidad) on the left bank of the Aguán river had initiated legal action to block the sales of their former lands to Miguel Facussé and René Morales.
What began with these legal complaints would turn into a 16-year process in which these former members had to navigate a political and economic terrain framed by the tensions between state and capital. As what eventually came to be known as the Authentic Reclaiming Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MARCA), they struggled to recover the land that they considered had been illegally taken away and to carve out a space within the region’s oil palm monoculture. Stuck between a transnationally oriented group of Honduran large landowners betting on the production of palm oil and a highly militarized but fragmented state, MARCA’s struggle is, on the one hand, that of constant shifts and combinations of legal and direct forms of pressure and negotiation with different factions within state institutions and other peasant organizations. On the other, it is one of constant tensions and accommodations to adapt their collective forms of production to the particular rhythms and needs of the global palm oil assemblage.

**The sons and daughters of those who did not want to sell: between the memories of dispossession and struggle**

I went into some depth in Chapter 3 regarding the process of the sales of the cooperatives in the Aguán. Here I will only introduce a few elements needed to frame the history of MARCA and its approach to that cycle of dispossession. I will focus on the case of the El Despertar cooperative, since this is the one that I came to know best, but certainly there is a shared experience between the three cooperatives that started the movement and many other cooperatives all over the Aguán region.

It is worth adding that this shared experience gave rise to a different historical narrative than that articulated by the Tocoa Parish’s *Pastoral Social*, although I would argue that its overarching scheme is essentially the same. In this case, because the initial participants were mainly former cooperative members who had lived in the valley, their actions were not animated by a sense of being the chosen people who came down from the hills, as in the case of the MCA. One of the things that most struck me from my conversations with MARCA’s older members...
was how Mitch was not really a salient element in their memories. This, of course, presents a major contrast with the accounts of people in MCA and MCR. In fact, the only three points on which both narratives overlap is their finger pointing at the “foreigners” (Miguel Facussé, René Morales and Reinaldo Canales) as the main culprits behind the sale of the cooperatives; the approval of the LMA in 1992 as the starting point of the wave of dispossession; and the claim that their actions should be understood as an agrarian reform with historical roots going back to the 1970s.

While the narrative of the Pastoral Social is based solely on a set of memories of dispossession (Hart 2006), that constructed by MARCA also integrates memories of struggle that connect their own situation with the longer history of the Honduran peasant movement and particularly with the “golden age” of the 1970s. MARCA’s narrative centers on a constant struggle against both the large landowners (capital) and their hired lackeys in the state. Moreover, unlike the MCA and the MCR, where most of the members are of a similar age and a somewhat similar migrating history, in the case of MARCA, there is a combination of older former cooperative members, who began the struggle and arrived in the region as part of the BAP, and a younger generation of both men and women who were either born in the region or arrived as infants and who claim the legacy of the peasant movement and vowed to right the wrongs of the past. As we will see later, this generational aspect significantly influenced the way in which the movement developed.

**Righting the wrongs of the past: the legal struggle against dispossession**

For the founder members of MARCA, everything began with the illegal sale of the lands of the cooperatives. As I showed in chapter 3, the sales combined both high levels of violence with “normal” market transactions in which the presence of a few “bought” members on the board of directors was crucial in finalizing the sales. In the case of El Despertar, on March 5, 1994, the board of directors authorized the president of the cooperative to negotiate and sell 636 hectares of oil palm lands to the company Oleo Palmas de Centroamérica, whose majority partner was
René Morales. Just as in many other cases, there was no clear consensus within the cooperative as to whether to sell or not, but in the end the sale was enforced from within by death threats against those opposed.

It is clear that in the process of sale of every cooperative there was some sort of resistance, but this tended to consist of quite isolated and disarticulated processes in which one or two members simply refused to sign and sanction the sale. In this case something similar happened initially, but after the sales were carried out, opponents were nonetheless able to come together. How did this occur? Location and kinship ties likely had something to do with it. In terms of location, in most cases what you would have is a set of scattered communities belonging to the different cooperatives and divided by oil palm plantations. The result was a pattern in which the members of the cooperative would come into contact with each other, but not necessarily with those from other cooperatives. However, in the case of El Despertar, La Trinidad y San Esteban, their spaces of dwelling – the result of housing projects similar to the one described for the case of Eugenia and Marino in Chapter 3 – are contiguous, while their pil palm fields are located at some distance. Thus, the working lands are separated, but their dwelling spaces are one next to one another, making them immediate neighbors.

In terms of kinship ties, it is worth remembering Marcelo’s story. When he arrived in 1974, he was part of an organized group back in Copán. However, once in the Aguán the group was split up and the different families were added to different cooperatives in the region. This had the effect of creating a kin network between different cooperatives, as people who knew each other from before and who in many cases shared family ties were scattered in different places. In many cases, moreover, members also moved between cooperatives. Marcelo, for example, was originally part of the San Esteban cooperative and later moved to El Despertar, both of which eventually became part of MARCA. These movements of people created social ties and means for information and the memories of dispossession and struggle to circulate and thus creating closer and stronger bonds across cooperatives.
These two circumstances allowed those who had opposed the sales in each cooperative to come together, share their experiences and embark on a collective project. It is important to add that this unity came after the sales, in 1996, when they presented their legal claims against the sales of the three cooperatives. According to one MARCA founder, they began to organize after they found out that they had sold more land than had initially been negotiated. Supposedly, when the sale was finalized, the idea was that each member was going to be left with an individual plot. One day he noticed that the few cows he owned were loose in the streets. When he went and asked one of the members of the board of directors, he told him that the cooperative had sold everything.

He immediately took off to Trujillo to try to figure out what had occurred. Asking around in the courtroom, he found out that not only was it true that they had sold all of the land to René Morales, but also that leading members of the municipal government had been involved in the process. A local lawyer told him that he should go to Tegucigalpa to figure out the whole process better. He slowly but surely managed to follow the paper trail back to René Morales and a note, dated March 5, 1994, in which the cooperative’s board of directors authorized the cooperative’s president to sell the lands to Morales.

Two things became evident after this inquiry. First, that there was a clear connection between businessmen such as Morales and the local governments and that the peasants could not count on finding support there. Second, the sale had been illegal. The LMA had opened up the possibility for agrarian reform lands to be sold, but it had two important requirements: first, the sale had to be approved by the cooperative’s general assembly and second, the sale had to be sanctioned and permitted by the INA. Neither of these conditions was fulfilled in the sale of these cooperatives. The aforementioned note that authorized the sale was only signed by the members of the board of directors – not the whole general assembly – and there was no documentation suggesting that the INA had approved the sale.
Armed with this information, they were approached by a lawyer who assured them that their case was as good as won and that they did not even have to pay him, because Morales would be forced to pay once he lost the case; things however, did not pan out in this way. A few months after the legal claim was presented, their lawyer told them that it had been cancelled. Why? Because they did not have the money to pay Morales back his “investment” (the sale payment), nor to pay the lawyer his fees! Hypothesizing that he had been paid off by Morales, the former cooperative members moved on, found another lawyer and started the process anew.

This pattern repeated itself several times. Each time they would hire a lawyer and pay his fees, only to find out later that their legal demands had been either cancelled or forever stalled. However, far from deterring them, this gave them a sense of purpose and unity. They became increasingly convinced that they needed to become stronger and that they needed to increase their numbers. This was not particularly difficult, as the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s was awash with grievances and poverty. In November 2005, a total of 28 groups from both the right and left banks came together to create the Unified Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MUCA). As MUCA, the social composition of the group changed a bit. While the founders – those from El Despertar, San Esteban and La Trinidad, who eventually became MARCA, as we will see later – were all former members of the sold cooperatives, most of the newcomers were younger and some were children of former cooperative members. Most had little to no experience working the land and many of them had worked in construction or as school teachers. What seems to have brought them all together was a grinding poverty that turned into a hunger for land as a way of improving their lives.

We can see here a similar pattern to that of the MCR. The original founders sought to attract other poor peasant families to beef up their numbers and, since these newcomers have a different historical trajectory, a somewhat different group emerged. The requirement of a plausible legal claim makes them paper over any differences and consolidate a single historical narrative.
The road blockade of the 5,000 machetes: from legal struggle to direct action

The creation of MUCA was the clear reflection of a region that combined a population strangled by poverty with massive riches produced and amassed around the oil palm monoculture. This movement can be understood as the coming together of historical grievances – the dispossession of the lands and what could have been and was reflected in the surviving cooperatives – and images and dreams of a better future for the disenchanted and impoverished youth. In both cases, the target of their frustrations was the same: the “foreign” palm men that controlled most of the monoculture while excluding them. We find again negation as the first step of identity formation within the peasant movement.

This means that just as the MCR and the MCA were a reflection of the tension between hills and valley, with the Church as transmission belt, MUCA was a condensation of the conjuncture in the lowlands and how the last cycle of dispossession was experienced there. Thus, to understand MUCA and its particular combination between “old” and “new,” it is necessary to have a better grasp of the conjuncture, particularly of how the national situation related to the region. In brief, the mid-2000s was a tense period in Honduras as a whole.

Twenty years after the signing of the 1982 constitution and the (supposed) transition to democracy, the state did not necessarily look better than it had then. The economy showed clear levels of stagnation at the same time that regional differences sharpened, with the most of the meager levels of production concentrated around San Pedro Sula and the maquila industry and Tegucigalpa in the center of the country (UNDP 2006).

Politically, the rule of law operated under the logic of what Marvin Barahona (2010) calls a “parallel state,” in which the law is upheld when it reinforces the interests of the political and economic oligarchy – manifested in the form of a two party system –, but is totally ignored and

101 Not to be confused with the idea of the Church as parallel state that I presented in the previous chapter.
dismissed when subaltern groups try to upheld their rights, as was clearly illustrated by the experience of the founders of MUCA before 2005.

This political situation was also present in the election that saw Mel Zelaya elected as president in early 2006. Although he came from the very same families and social groups that formed the traditional political and economic oligarchy, Zelaya’s campaign emphasized the idea of civic participation and from the beginning it was clear that he had some sympathy for and a more open posture towards the demands of social movements. In fact, it was this invitation of the social movements to the political ball – an event usually reserved for the elites organized in the two-party system – that prompted, or made necessary, the coup. Promoting social policies was one thing, inviting in new actors – especially such wretches – was simply unacceptable for the country’s elites.

This is also a period in which new forms of political organization from below began to take shape. The promotion of the SAP divided the more traditional social movements in Honduras, such as the peasant and union movements (only the teachers’ movement retains some sort of relevance). This fractioning left a void that slowly came to be filled by regional popular movements that responded to very concrete grievances and conflicts related to topics such as natural resources, human rights and access to public services. Among the better known of these regional groups was the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), which links Lenca communities in the west (see Graham 2009), the Black Honduran Fraternal Organization (OFRANEH), based in Garifuna communities on the north coast (see Anderson 2009; Brondo 2013), and the Western Regional Community Council (PRO), which connects local patronatos from the northwest, mainly around topics such as access to social services (see Sosa and Ortega 2008). All of these regional movements have longer histories of course. What is particular about the mid-2000s conjuncture is that they began to come together to form some type of national platform. As a result of this dynamic, there was a
greater dialogue between the different movements and coordination of their strategies and tactics.\textsuperscript{102}

The Aguán was not immune to this dynamic. I already recounted in the previous chapter the story of the Permanent Assembly of Popular Organizations of the Aguán (APOP\textipa{\textsuperscript{a}}) and of how it dissolved in the mid-1990s. A few years later and under a similar name, the Popular Organizations Network of the Aguán (COPA) was created to coordinate the different regional efforts. Just as in the case of APOP\textipa{\textsuperscript{a}}, the organization was an expression of the social and political reality of what was happening in the valley, but with a limited grasp of the tensions between hills and valley. In general, its membership continued to come mainly from the regional unions and particularly from state functionaries. However, because of the region’s social composition and the increasing unrest around land issues, they had come closer to the concerns and organizing attempts of the peasantry.

MUCA was a condensation of these conjunctural elements: the new members with different tactics and social backgrounds, the older traditional history of the peasant movement and the agrarian reform sector in the Aguán. A change in strategy also came out of this combination. If up to 2005 they had been content with trying to recover their lands through legal means, with the influx of more and new people, many with experience in other forms of popular mobilization, their strategy shifted towards direct action. The first such action, one that is well remembered as a foundational moment, came on February 7, 2006, when some five thousand MUCA members – armed with machetes – blockaded and occupied the principal bridge to Tocoa – thus cutting off the town from the rest of the country – in order to request a resolution of their demands. They remained on the bridge for four days, until a commission sent

\textsuperscript{102} As far as I know, there has not been any systematic effort to reconstruct and study this moment of confluence of the different regional expressions of the Honduran popular movement. This is an important and glaring gap in our knowledge of the country, as it is clear that what later became the resistance movement against the coup has its roots in this effort.
from Tegucigalpa sat down to negotiate and reached agreements regarding not only the return of the lands that had been illegally taken away (the older group), but also the distribution of land for the landless (the younger group). This was the first time that MUCA approached the topic in this way, using pressure to force the government to negotiate directly. However, it also turned into a new lesson: what was agreed by the government under pressure would be forgotten once the pressure was lifted. The government never honored these initial agreements and MUCA was forced to take to the streets again.

Afterwards, MUCA members decided that a way of moving forward would be by combining legal processes with the traditional show of strength of the Honduran peasant movement: the occupation/recuperation of disputed lands. On January 7, 2007, they attempted to recuperate the disputed lands of La Concepción cooperative on the right bank. Their reasoning was that since this was one of the legal cases more advanced, a little nudge in the right direction would produce success. This was a miscalculation, however, as they were evicted after five days on the land.

They were not discouraged, and on June 8, 2009, less than a month before the coup, they decided to raise the stakes and go directly for the central axis of capital accumulation in the region: the extracting mills. Early in the morning that day, they entered and occupied the Exportadora del Atlántico extracting mill – property of Miguel Facussé – in Quebrada de Arena and remained in control for a few hours before they were evicted. This time the strategy had a major effect, one that was clearly shaped by the moment. As we saw in the MCA case, 2008 saw a significant escalation of the conflicts between cattle and palm men, on the one hand, and peasant organizations, on the other. This escalation was reaching quite disturbing levels and President Manuel Zelaya seems to have been worried about having the beginning of a civil war on his hands. Less than ten days after the extracting mill occupation, on June, 17, Zelaya himself travelled to Tocoa to meet with the leadership of MUCA and sign a set of agreements. More importantly, a special commission, made up of representatives of MUCA, the executive branch
and the Agriculture and Livestock Secretariat (SAG), was created to pursue a negotiated solution to the conflict. This seemed to appease the members of MUCA, who had already seen Zelaya’s efforts to resolve the country’s agrarian conflicts – particularly those of the Aguán – with the signing of Decree 18-2008. All of these processes would come crumbling down less than two weeks later when Zelaya was ousted by the military and flown in his pajamas to Costa Rica.

**A tale of oil palms: the coup and the Aguán**

The three movements that I have presented so far in this chapter were deeply affected by the coup and the ousting of Zelaya. In this section, I would like to outline some general elements and round up the stories of the three peasant movements, as well as wrap up some of the findings of the chapter by looking at the overdetermination of the oil palm monoculture in the region.

**MCA: from stagnation to crisis**

Already before 2009 the situation in Guadalupe Carney was complicated. Poverty was rampant and the MCA’s structures – as the working commissions were known – had fallen apart after international cooperation funds disappeared in 2005-06. Somewhere around 2007 it was decided to pass control of the movement to the representatives of the three peasant confederations involved (CNTC, ACAN, and ANACH). Because of the high levels of poverty and the failure of the EACs to become viable enterprises, many people began to abandon them. This manifested itself in three different ways. First, people would sell their membership in the EAC but would keep their lot in Guadalupe Carney, thus deepening the difference between political and economic organization. Second, those memberships began to be sold illegally on the black market for prices that were out of reach for a poor or landless peasant family (around $50 thousand). This led to the suspicion that money laundering by local drug barons was also involved. Third, young men, in particular, have been migrating to the United States as the only survival strategy left to them. The marks of this exodus can be seen all over a community full of
single mothers living in corrugated steel roof and cinderblock houses and in the tales of success abroad, but also tragedy, that circulate in Guadalupe Carney.

As I mentioned earlier, the MCA had a particularly active role in the drafting and promotion of Decree 18-2008. This had given the movement some notoriety among the Honduran economic and political elites, and it is perhaps not surprising that on the 28th of June, just as Zelaya was being kidnapped, the Guadalupe Carney community was surrounded by army and navy commandos. Far from weakening the movement, this reanimated the community’s sense of being in resistance and struggle, and its members again took to the streets to protest the coup. This in turn led to the army to place a permanent camp within the community and on December 15, more than 500 soldiers entered the community to search for guns but came out empty-handed. This raid had been prompted by media reports that painted the Guadalupe Carney community as a terrorists and guerrilla lair.103

The people of Guadalupe Carney were nevertheless not deterred, on April 6, 2010, 210 families decided to recuperate 510 hectares of El Tumbador, an oil palm plantation controlled by Miguel Facussé, but which was part of the original 5,700 hectares of the CREM. Initially, there was an agreement with Facussé’s security team that as long as the families remained within those 510 hectares, which were clearly part of the original CREM, there would be no problem. Most of the families involved in this recuperation came from those EACs that had had particularly bad luck with the allocation of the lands and either had too little land for the number of members or really poor lands. El Tumbador was covered in peak producing oil palms and thus became an important source of income for these families.

Just four months later, in August, a second group of families decided to occupy the remaining lands of El Tumbador that were not included in the original CREM, which led

103 One of the most sensationalist of these notes even mentioned that the Palestinian organization Hamas was preparing terrorist cells in the region.
Facade evict both groups from the whole plantation. The situation did not finish there. On November 15, 2010, 120 people arrived in the early morning at the gates of El Tumbador in an attempt to recuperate these lands once more. They were received by the gunshots from Facussé’s security guards and supposedly from members of the navy who were disguised as security guards. According to various accounts, the final toll in what came to be known as the “El Tumbador Massacre” was the extra-judicial execution of five members of the MCA, four more gravely injured, an attempted murder of yet another MCA supporter, and four arbitrary detentions with inhumane and denigrating treatment. These actions, according to these same accounts, were perpetrated by an armed group composed of private security guards, supported by a unit from the Fifteenth Special Forces Battalion based in Río Claro, Trujillo.

After this, the economic crisis of most of the EACs – many of which were not even active – was augmented by a political one. Poverty, outmigration and high levels of violence, in which the oil palm monoculture – as in the case of El Tumbador – combined with increasing drug traffic and military and police persecution, had become the reality of the community. Nonetheless, the vibrant history of the peasant movement is immediately evident when one visits the community for the annual celebration of its anniversary or when one sits down with the men and women who were the protagonists of this history and begins to share their experiences.
“Welcome to the 13th Anniversary. Guadalupe Carney”

**MCR: starting anew yet once more**

In Nueva Vida, the coup was also received with grief, pain and despair. They were not surrounded by the military, but it was clear that they had been placed on a black list, due to their presence in the list of groups that would benefit from Decree 18-2008. In this case the rent capturing mechanisms that organize the Honduran state are noticeable. I already mentioned how the land had been overvalued and how the first attempt at a sale fell through, due to INA functionaries’ attempts to receive a kickback. This situation of using the MCR plight to make a personal profit by government functionaries did not stop with the election of José Lobo as
The new general director of the INA, César Ham, brought a much more personal and patronage-oriented style. For the MCR, this meant taking care of the case himself and negotiating directly with the Rivera family. According to Juan, the lawyer who had been working with the MCR, this led to the purchase of the 662 hectares by the INA for a bit less than $3 million in 2010. While I consider the source reliable, I was never able to corroborate this information.

The problems did not stop with the sale. Two years after the coup, on June 24, 2011, the Nueva Vida community suffered the worst eviction of its history, one that would leave a permanent scar in the collective memory of the community. Around 9 a.m. that day, both military and police forces arrived at the Guanacaste tree at the main entrance of the community and informed them that they had an eviction order. Between the disbelief and despair, the people of the community moved between trying to save some of their possessions and presenting resistance to the law enforcers. At 2 p.m. the eviction began with relentless violence and a show of force by both police and military, who swept into the community, burning down houses, shooting and killing livestock and chopping down the few orange trees that the EACs had planted. Bulldozers tore down the homes of those who had houses with cinderblock walls. At 9 p.m., when the eviction finished, few signs remained that an entire community had been housed on those lands.

According to Casa Alianza (2012), an international NGO dedicated to the protection of the rights of children, the eviction left most of the community’s kids with post-traumatic stress and deeply ingrained fear of the police and military, as I was also able to corroborate during my fieldwork. According to an evaluation of the material losses done by the FSAR (2011), the number of affected people was 493, more than half of whom were minors (18 years old or less).

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104 It is worth remembering that this was the first post-coup election and that Lobo’s government was not recognized internationally by everyone.
All of the community and productive infrastructure was destroyed, for losses of over $500,000. More importantly, several women who were pregnant at the time lost their babies as a result of the stress and the teargas.

This eviction prompted international solidarity and scrutiny, which lessened the intensity of the repression. The very next day, the men of the MCR entered the land again to make sure that they did not lose their claim. They were unable to work, however, as the lands they were attempting to recuperate were under constant surveillance by the police, and they had lost everything, so starting their milpas anew was also difficult. The homeless families had to move to the community center of the neighboring village of Rigores and many decided to abandon the movement.

After a few months, whole families moved back to the Nueva Vida to try once again to rebuild their lives from scratch, always with the fear that the community could be evicted again. Some of these fears became a reality. On September 16, after two policemen lost their lives in a shootout with an armed band close to the Nueva Vida, the police entered the community again searching for weapons and the perpetrators. They found neither, but the belongings of several families were destroyed, 22 men were severely beaten and taken to Tocoa for interrogation and the 16-year-old son of one of the MCR’s leaders was kidnapped and tortured, before being liberated.

The history of the Nueva Vida in the aftermath of the eviction can be characterized as a constant state of instability. For those who remained, it became a clear confirmation of what they already knew after Mitch, that they no longer had anywhere to go. Unlike the Guadalupe Carney community, were many young people have migrated to the U.S., in Nueva Vida it is hard to find families with members abroad. This has nothing to do with lack of desire to leave, but rather with a form of bare life that leaves little space to create the sort of surplus needed to support a migration to the U.S. In terms of their hold over the land, things have looked up somewhat. All of 2013 was spent in the process of finally giving the six EACs that form the MCR
legal control over the land they occupy. It has been a long and tortuous process, in which the leaders of the movement have had to travel constantly outside of the community presenting round after round of paperwork, which of course puts great economic stress on such an impoverished community. The lack of will by many of the functionaries of the INA to ease the process is quite evident. In the end, an arrangement materialized that will sell the land to the EACs, which will have to pay a debt of around $2.5 million over 20 years. This is, of course, impossible producing solely maize and beans; even if the land were already covered in mature oil palm it is hard to imagine how they could cover such a large debt.

The people of Nueva Vida are narrowly stuck within the oil palm monoculture, both economically and as part of the larger social field. Working as day laborers in the citrus and oil palm plantations is a necessity. Also, the MCR as a whole, and with very limited support from outside, is trying to inch up the production chain, by planting palm trees and becoming a raw material producing need economy, an attempt that has encountered various barriers. However, with the sword of Damocles of debt hanging over their heads, they will hardly have a choice.

Finally, the families of the MCR have experienced closely the connection between oil palms and violence in the Aguán. The police raid on the community on September 16, 2011, was prompted by an armed clashed between the police and one of the several armed bands that rob oil palm fruits in the region (to be sold on the black market). As I mentioned earlier, the neighboring Finca Panamá has become a nucleus of the struggle over land between peasant communities and the palm men’s armed guards. On July, 2, 2012, the independent (non-affiliated) peasant Gregorio Chávez Aranda disappeared in the area of the Panamá farm. Four days later, after a tireless search, his family found his body buried in Lot 8 of Finca Panamá. Chávez was the fourth peasant that had disappeared close to the Panama in the preceding year or so. However, this was the first time that search parties had been able to enter the property.

The La Panamá community, which is located next to the oil palm plantation and is composed mainly of former cooperative members that sold that same plantation to Facussé in the 1990s,
reacted with outrage and occupied the property, giving birth to the Gregororio Chávez Refoundational Peasant Movement (MCRGC), which in turn has become one of the most conflictive land recuperations in the region. Violence and dispossession, as well as images of improvement and resistance, overlap in various forms with the oil palms.

**Figure 9. Invitation to the commemorative festival of the eviction, Nueva Vida community**

![Invitation](image)

**MARCA: the coup as a catalyst**

For the peasant organizations grouped together in MUCA, the coup was a sign that they needed to raise the stakes. One of the leaders of MARCA remembers how that day – June 28 in the early morning — they were gathered in a school on the right bank when they heard about the ousting
of President Zelaya. They began to discuss the situation and came to the conclusion that if they were “real men,” they would have to fight with what was theirs, “with balls” (i.e., with courage). This form of highly masculinized speech referred to a reading of the coup as the response by the economic and political elites to Zelaya’s attempts — however half-hearted and insufficient — to resolve the agrarian crisis in favor of the peasant organizations.

From the first days after June 28, the peasant movements of the Aguán – MCR and MCA included — threw their weight behind the National Popular Front of Resistance (FNRP), the broad alliance of organizations against the coup, and constantly travelled to Tegucigalpa and other places to protest and demand the return of Manuel Zelaya as the legitimate president. With the repression increasing and the de facto election of José Porfirio Lobo as president in November, the members of MUCA decided that “if we are going to die anyway, we might as well do it in the lands,” as one of the leaders of the organization told me. They began organizing synchronized and massive land recuperations for the end of the year. On December 9, 2009, in the early morning, around 600 families occupied between 21 and 26 plantations on both river banks, for a total of nearly 20,000 hectares. This, of course, was met by several attempts to evict them, but once the news of these occupations reached the ears of the population, many landless families of both the Aguán and other places, flocked to join them. According to MUCA, their membership increased to over three thousand families (MUCA 2010). This increase in the size of the movement made it almost impossible to evict them all, especially since they knew the terrain better than the police and military and would sometime vanish from one lot just to appear afterwards in another.

This forced the hand of the government and, in February 2010, negotiations began between MUCA and the government. MUCA’s demands were straightforward: 20,000 hectares of cultivated lands (oil palms), as well as the reinstatement of the commission that Zelaya had created just before being deposed and that was supposed to organize the process of acquisition of the lands possessed by Facussé, Morales and Canales. The government’s counteroffer was
very limited: a much smaller amount of land, close to 3,000 hectares, which the peasants would have to pay in their totality to the current owners, as well as the establishing a set of “co-investment” agreements with Facussé’s Corporación Cressida and Morales´ s Agropalma. According to these agreements – basically a form of contract farming105 – MUCA´ s EACs and cooperatives would be forced to sell all of their production to these companies, accepting whatever price that they offered.

In the end, the agreement signed by both members of MUCA and President Lobo was somewhere in between these two proposals. The government agreed to purchase 3,000 hectares of oil palm lands and another 3,000 hectares of uncultivated lands in the first three months, with another 1,000 cultivated and 4,000 uncultivated hectares one year later, for a total of 11,000 hectares. An arbitrated price of over $6,000 per hectare was determined by specialists.106 The resulting total price would be paid to the landowners by the state, which would then collect the payments from MUCA at a low rate of interest. The government also committed to providing the 2,500 MUCA families health services, as well as schools and the construction of 200 houses in two years.

In mid-April 2010 the agreement was signed. According to MUCA, it was signed at gunpoint, as on April 7, the government deployed over 7,000 soldiers and policemen in the region, which led to higher levels of repression and the murder, under mysterious circumstances, of four members of MUCA. Nonetheless, MUCA viewed the agreement as a victory since it was the first time that they had managed to pry anything away from Facussé.

105 I touched on this topic of contract farming earlier in this chapter and will return to it briefly in the conclusion. Also, there are several review works with deal with this topic in more depth (see for example, Little and Watts 1994; Bijman 2008; Rehber 2007).

106 According to (Ríos 2012), this price is significantly higher than the one presented by an agronomist hired by INA of over $4,000 per hectare, which was also virtually the price that Facussé had requested initially (he wanted a differentiated rate between cultivated and non-cultivated lands). According to the author, both prices are unpayable for the peasant organization in any case.
Their members were relocated into six settlements on the right bank: La Aurora, La Concepción, La Confianza, La Isla and El Marañón. At the time of writing (early 2015), MUCA had still only received around half of the land promised and none of the social services. Once again the state’s promises lasted as long as the peasant organizations’ pressure was on the ground, only to be forgotten once the pressure was gone. This also left MUCA in a very limited space – less than five hectares per family – which contributed to suffocating them economically. This has brought pressures on associates, particularly single women and older men, to leave the EACs. We can locate then a cycle in which peasant movements tend to attract new members in the moment of occupation and direct struggle for land – when they need strength in numbers –, only to try to diminish that number once they are in control of the land, in an attempt to improve the household-to-land ratio.107

The agreement also meant a split within MUCA. The members of the former cooperatives El Despertar, La Trinidad, and San Esteban – which I mentioned earlier in this chapter – as well as San Isidro, located on the right bank, refused to sign the agreement. According to them, they did not need to pay for the land, because they had not sold it, and decided to go on with their legal claims, thus giving birth to MARCA.

The members of MARCA continued their struggle for the land they deemed theirs, combining presence in the lands in the form of occupations, with the continuation of the lawsuits in court. Nevertheless, they changed their legal strategy. If formerly they had been denouncing the illegality of the sales to Morales and Facussé, now they moved against the former boards of directors that had approved the sales. In the case of El Despertar, but with similar situations in the other cooperatives, the then president of the board of directors

107 Nashieli Rangel Loera references a similar dynamic within the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil (MST), which she calls an “ever increasing spiral.”
responded to the demand against him by accepting that he had acted illegally and that the cooperative’s agreement to sell should be nullified.

The legal process dragged on for almost two more years, during which time the members of MARCA would occupy one or two of the claimed estates for as long as they could, until they were evicted. The occupations would last between a few hours and a few months. This was a harsh period for the families. They were harassed and several members were killed – both in clashes with the security forces and in targeted assassinations –, and identified MARCA members were placed on a black list and were unable to work on the oil palm plantations in the region. They survived from the solidarity of their neighbors, the palm fruit that they could cut during their occupations and the remittances that the sons of some of the leaders would send from the U.S. to support the movement.

Eventually, on June 29, 2012 – two full years after the coup – the Supreme Court ruled in favor of MARCA, giving it full control over the El Despertar, La Trinidad and San Isidro cooperatives (they had gained control of San Esteban in May, 2011). This was, of course, received with great joy by the members of the movement. They remember how on that date they went over to the plantations with members of the police to carry out the eviction order against Agropalma. They would tell me with great pride how they used to be the ones evicted by the police and the private security guards, but now it was their turn to evict the palm men. This joy, however, was short-lived. On September 22 of that same year, Antonio Trejo, the lawyer who had led the final legal offensive, was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Tegucigalpa while he attending a wedding. The news brought great grief to the members of MARCA, who began to fear the beginning of a new cycle of evictions. They were right. In September 2013 the San Isidro cooperative was evicted, followed by evictions in El Despertar and La Trinidad in May 2014. These evictions have meant an actual reversal of decisions of the Supreme Court and illustrate unmistakably the ease with which powerful interests in Honduras can bend the law.
Epilogue: the overdetermination of palm oil

But circuits of capital are bound up, in the longer term, with circuits of sociability – patterns of belief and desire, levels of confidence, degrees of identification with the good life of the commodity.


The oil palm monoculture is at the heart of life in the Aguán. It animates it and lubricates the cogs of the regional forms of domination. It determines the way in which the region is articulated into other larger wholes: the Honduran state and the global palm oil assemblage, among others. But it also defines in very concrete ways how particular lives are lived and ended. Palm oil is of course not a living being, but it is in its history that we can read, as it were, the
history of the Aguán as both region and landscape. Palm oil structures the Aguán: “...[it] exhibit[s] tendencies – lines of force, openings and closure which constrain, shape, channel and in that sense, ‘determine’” (Hall 1985:96).

From the way in which the Honduran state, in accord and with the support of the IFIs, went about assembling labor, capital and land to create the BAP, came the roots of a process that led in this direction. It was not the only possibly trajectory, but as time went by, and living labor turned into objectified labor in the form of the plantations and the levees to protect them from floods, the fate and life of the region became more intrinsically linked to that of the palm trees. For as Stuart Hall (1985:98) reminds us,

...a technically competent but politically insubordinate labor force is no labor force at all for capital. Therefore, the more important task is cultivating that kind of labor which is able and willing, morally and politically, to be subordinated to discipline, the logic, the culture and compulsions of the economic mode of production...

In this case, for palm oil to take the place that it has in the Aguán, it had to become a force both politically, culturally and ideologically. Laborers cultured in the monoculture had to be cultivated and with it, a whole semantic field – a common sense – that would allow them to make sense of their concrete experiences and ways of being in the world was also created. This sense was not homogeneous, as different people lived it from different positions, nor was it necessarily coherent. According to Gramsci (1971:348), the common sense is a set of immediate, unconnected facts just taken for granted and non-critical assertions on reality and the “way in which things are,” where “…in a whole range of judgments common sense identifies the exact cause, simple and to hand, and does not let itself be distracted by fancy quibbles and pseudo-profound, pseudo-scientific metaphysical mumbo-jumbo.”

Common sense is conservative and helps preserve the status quo, with the idea that things are “naturally” like they are. This is a useful way of thinking about the role that oil palms play in the Aguán. Oil palm has been constructed as the only viable crop in the region in
economic (better price in the market) and environmental (flood resistant) terms. At the same time, oil palm plantations are seen as spaces of danger and violence and as an opportunity to leave poverty behind. They are presented as a dangerous monoculture that destroys ecological diversity at the same time that they are the key for a better future for the local poor. The oil palm is the development wager of the state at the same time that it is understood as creating an unruly landscape, in which illegal activities such as gun running and drug trafficking can flourish. All of these contradictory elements live together, side by side, creating a situation in which the “naturalness” of the dominant position of the palm oil industry goes unquestioned. It is important to remember that the expansion of the crop in the region has not been carried out only by large industrial producers, but that peasant cooperatives, EACs and non-organized small and medium-size farmers have also enthusiastically adopted palm cultivation.

With this I am not trying to say that there are no conflicts or disputes around the palm oil industry. My analysis of the forms of differentiation and the conflicts over land should have left that clear. My argument, rather, is that due to the type of historical development of both the industry and the region, there is a consensus regarding its importance and centrality. Further, that what we find is a situation in which the Aguán region – directly in the lowlands, but also indirectly in the hills – is overdetermined (Althusser 1969)\(^{108}\) by the palm oil industry.

Labor–capital conflicts in the Aguán valley center around how the profits of the industry are distributed. More obviously, during the reform period, the locus of conflict was around what I have called the points of rent capture. After the sale of the cooperatives, it shifted towards the

\(^{108}\) According to Louis Althusser (1969:101), “...the ‘contradiction’ [between labor and capital] is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, and even from the instances it governs; it is radically affected by them, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates; it might be called overdetermined in its principle.”
forms in which different groups come into contact and are articulated with the industry. From the standpoint of the palm men, the peasant families of the region should come into contact as a docile wage labor force, or in the worst case — as the co-investment proposal shows — as contract farmers with little or no control over the market. On the other side, from the perspective of peasant organizations such as MARCA, the objective is to become raw material producers, but with some control over to whom they sell and with the eventual possibility of mimicking La Salamá or any of COAPALMA’s cooperatives. For others such as MCR, their goal is also to become raw material producers, but in their case, this is a steeper challenge, which brings us to some of the thornier topics.

By looking at this oversimplified characterization, it might seem that there is not much difference between the different positions. However, those differences are crucial. The co-investment model, pursued — reluctantly, I must add — by people such as Facussé, is organized around two conditions: controlling the purchase price of the oil palm fruit and assuring that the land has to be paid by the peasant organizations. In economic terms, it means that the organizations would be trapped and fully dependent on the large plantations and their mills. Moreover, the fact that the organizations have to pay for the land means that it becomes a form of rent capture. In political terms, this debt trap means two things. On the one hand, it legitimizes the rights that Facussé, Morales and others claim over the land, which is a thorny issue for organizations such as MARCA. On the other, it means that the peasant organizations have to remain docile and avoid any attempt at independent production. It is exactly against this logic that the cooperatives mobilized in 1981 to gain control over COAPALMA and it is exactly the same reason behind the decision of MUCA to reject the co-investment proposal.

I already mentioned how the legitimizing possession becomes an issue for organizations such as MARCA. This of course should not foreclose the possibility of a contract agriculture scheme. As a leader of this organization told me, “I don’t know why Facussé is so obsessed with these lands, if he lets us keep them we have no problem selling him the [oil palm] fruit.”
Here the topic of property over land becomes crucial. In Latin America in general, property over land has not only to do with holding an asset, but about prestige and power. The fact that much of the history of the continent is based on domination structures based on possession of land as a form of controlling labor goes a long way in explaining this. As Adolfo Gilly has argued for Mexico,

> [a]ll the Mexican revolutions, with their bloody struggles over political power, have gravitated around ground rent. Who controls this power decides who owns and who usufructs the land and water, which in kind affirms and consolidates the existing power. The root and reason of the tragedy are the existence and destiny of the Mexican people; its recurrent theme, its leitmotiv, are land and power.

For the Honduran case, this has been one of the historical reasons behind the land owning elite’s opposition to the agrarian reform. I would argue that for people such as Facussé and Morales, the idea of “giving away” this land is unacceptable, not because of economic reasons – even without co-investment contracts there are not many options when it comes to selling to the extracting mills –, but because it would mean allowing their property rights to be questioned, and with them, their role in society and the source of the rent they accrue.

According to Marx (quoted by Harvey 2006:360), “an attack upon one form of property... might cast considerable doubt on the other form [ownership of the means of production].”

Finally, as I have argued throughout this and the previous chapters, the process of labor capture and consolidation of the oil palm monoculture was also deeply gendered. The journey towards the Aguán began a process of transformation of the roles and dynamics between men and women, both within and outside the household. From the beginning, one of the central objectives of the cooperatives under the BAP was to create a new type of peasant subject, one disciplined, bridled to one place and oriented towards the market. This meant that the subsistence of their households should rest more on wages or other forms of monetary income than on self-provisioning. With this shift, came the heightening of the differentiation between paid and unpaid labor and between public and domestic spaces. It also meant the rise of a new
property regime based on the idea of land to the tiller, which in practice tended to collapse into land for the men. All of these shifts resulted in larger and more intensive restrictions upon women and their access to resources and control over the provisioning of their households.

The land occupations that took place in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch and that have been the subject of this chapter attempted to return to the path of the agrarian reform. At least in the heads of some of the people in the PS behind these efforts, the idea was that things could be done differently this time. Reality has shown that in the end, the creation of these new peasant movements became a form of labor capture by other means. The fact that the new organizations decided or had no choice but to take the form defined within the agrarian reform legislation, meant that in practice the results in terms of the relations of production were similar to those of the BAP. By the early 2000s, the palm oil monoculture totally dominated the region, leaving little chance for other forms of production to become viable alternatives.
Conclusion

Exploring and then narrating the historical process of a region is a process similar to that of braiding hair. You begin with a lot of individual hairs – some of them in knots, some of them straight – that you must begin to comb carefully. Then, you organize them into strands; you might try to make sure that they are all of the same thickness, but they will always be uneven. Finally, you begin to weave the strands together, making sure that they are tight, but not so tight as to pull out the hairs. What you are left with at the end is a single braid in which the different strands are visible, but not in a homogeneous manner. At times, one of the strands is visible, while others hide behind it, just to appear in the next twist in connection to other ones that we could not see before.

I began the process of writing this dissertation with scattered personal field notes, meager secondary sources and transcriptions of the individual memories of men and women who live or have lived in the Aguán. I then brushed them carefully in search of patterns and then proceeded to weave them together into a narrative representation of the historical transformation of the region. At the end – and to continue with the hairstyle metaphor – what I was left with is a four-strand braid, in which each strand represents one of the main processes that connects the historical trajectory of the region – both as it was and as it is remembered – with its tempestuous present. These four strands were: 1. The perspective of passive revolution to approach the process of state formation in postcolonial Central America; 2. The tension between labor capture and flight as a way of approaching the topic of agrarian reform, in the midst of different processes of dispossession and struggle; 3. The consolidation on the ground of the global palm oil assemblage and the move to the center of the region’s life of oil palm monoculture and; 4. The process of creation of historical narratives in the Aguán, as the tension between individual and collective memories. In what follows, I will briefly characterize each strand from the vantage point of the situation in the region in 2014, as a way of laying out clearly my main arguments.
**First strand: from passive revolution to its unraveling**

I used Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of passive revolution – as well as its reinterpretation and critique by Kalyan Sanyal (2013) – to think about the historical processes of political domination and struggle in postcolonial Honduras. My idea was to approach how different groups came to be positioned in the dynamics of political and economic domination and in the uneven geographical and institutional patterns that were produced in the process. Following Abrams (1988) warning that what we usually think is the state is nothing more than a reified and reifying mask that hides the tracks after the deed, my emphasis was necessarily on the political practices of the different groups in contention.

From this starting point, I was able to interrogate the ever-present national myth of the rich but impoverished country, which tries to explain the country’s continued failure to progress and develop as some sort of innate inability of its population – peasants in particular – to work and exploit the abundant natural riches. Seen from this perspective, we can find a thread that connects the policies to attract the banana plantations with the Bajo Aguán Project in the 1970s and recent attempts by the government to create “charter cities” (Davidson 2012)\(^9\) in the country. Progress and development have always been something to be imported in the form of either “better” labor, capital or knowhow.

There is little new here and much of the critical literature on development makes the same argument. What I am interested in is how in a country like Honduras, or Central America

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\(^9\) According to economist Paul Romer (Fuller and Romer 2012), a “charter city” resembles in general terms a special economic zone, that is, a space within a “host” country that is ruled by differentiated economic rules (tariff exemptions, for example). However, the charter city scheme would also include its own differentiated political and legal rules. The idea behind this is quite simple. By creating these sorts of spaces, abstracted from the institutional and cultural failures that keep third world countries underdeveloped, economic growth will thrive and eventually become an example and force that radiates out to the rest of the country. As we can see, the principle is basically the same as that present in the original BAP (chapter 2).
in more general terms, this idea of the rich but impoverished country is connected with the narrative of the failed states (see for example, Ghani and Lockhart 2008). According to this sort of analysis, certain states have failed when they are unable to guarantee basic social rights to their citizens or a healthy business climate. In the end, what it all boils down to, is the failure by certain states to retain the monopoly over violence within their borders. For example, according to Paul Collier (2009), the history of modern state building has been the resulting balance between the concentration of political power – understood as the ability to exercise violence – in the state, and the ability by citizens to enforce fiscal accountability on that same state. Other explanatory frameworks under the overarching rubric of failed states focus rather on the relationship between natural resources and development.

In what is generally known as “political Dutch disease,” a negative relation is proposed between natural resources and generalized economic development. Phrased differently, the more natural resources a country has, the less economic development it will experience. There are plenty of explanations for this (for a review, see Ross 1999), but basically, the idea is that in countries where rent extraction is the central economic activity, the concentration of this rent in one or two industries – oil is usually the example given – takes away the incentives for the state elites to construct consensus among the population (low fiscal accountability in terms of Collier’s framework). As a result, non-democratic regimes rise to power and vicious infighting between groups to control the points of rent capture ensues. Although this sort of analysis tends to focus on oil producing countries, it is evident how Honduras – and probably Guatemala and El Salvador for that matter – could also fit within this analysis.110

The failed state/resource curse literature has come under heavy critique from different angles. Particularly, critics argue that this is a highly ethnocentric approach, that it tries to

110 According to the Fund for Peace’s Failed State Index, in 2013 Honduras was ranked 75 of 178 countries. Guatemala, the highest ranking country in Central America, was ranked 70th (see: http://ffp.statesindex.org/).
present the supposed history of the Western countries as an abstract universal and that very little attention is paid to the specific ways in which states are shaped. For example, according to Pinar Bilgin and Adam David Morton (2002:75), in an article that approaches the failed states literature from a political economy of security perspective,

[op]ur aim has not so much been to generate an alternative conception of ‘failed states’, but with presenting an alternative to the construction of ‘failed states’ as political practice. It therefore behooves us to highlight how the ‘state’ element within the notion of ‘failed states’ is neglected, sanitised and presented within a benign form of political order. Perhaps, therefore, rather than focus on ‘failed states’, increased attention should be granted to the ‘failed universalisation’ of the ‘imported state’ within the post-colonial world.

As I have shown in this study, much can be advanced in this direction by playing close attention to the relation between the institutionalization of political practice – state formation – and the ways in which the agrarian question is framed. I will return to the topic of the agrarian question later on. Regarding the process of institutionalization of political practice, approaching the development of the Honduran postcolonial state from the Gramscian perspective of passive revolution has been particularly fruitful.

From the standpoint of passive revolution, rather than the history of a failed state, what we find is a story of “success,” in which an incipient and rather weak would-be bourgeoisie managed to create the conditions for capital accumulation despite the presence of conservative and non-capitalistic sectors of the elite and highly mobile subaltern groups. In postcolonial Honduras, state, class and nation, came to be formed together. It was in the process of trying to create and control the points of rent capture that a set of institutions – both formal and informal – were produced to position, make sense, police and regulate the positions of the different groups in the country. In fact, part of the reason that most postcolonial attempts at progress or development, have focused on one particular activity in one particular space is that this approach allows for easier vertical integration and thus, easier and more stable control over the points of rent capture.
However, more than trying to construct a counter-narrative from which “failure” is read as “success,” I think the point is to unpack what is being understood as failure or success and by whom. The fact that the Honduran state has “failed” to move more than half of its population above the poverty line should not obscure the fact that the history of businessmen such as Facussé has clearly been one of success. As Abrams (1988) argued more than two decades ago, our focus should been how political practice is institutionalized and then hidden behind the almighty mask of the state.

For the specific case of Honduras, the processes of state, class and nation formation have always been riddled by contradictions and conflicts in which the resulting equilibriums of coercion and consent have been spread unevenly both geographically and socially. Socially, a set of agreements and pacts allowed for the creation of an alliance between the incipient bourgeois class fractions and the more conservative sectors organized mainly around the cattle haciendas. In contrast, the relation between dominant and subaltern groups has been forever based on coercion. Geographically, a clear differentiation was created between the north coast as the “banana republic” – with San Pedro Sula as its “industrial” capital – and the rest of the country as the “non-banana republic” – with Tegucigalpa as the seat of political power.

It would be under Carías’s dictatorship that this form of domination would consolidate into a specific state form, laying down the framework upon which later governments and political projects would be created. Besides the attempts at showcasing the process of political succession as democratic, there were the basic principles or understandings upon which this state form was built. These were understood “...as a particular moment in a continuing struggle between different interests in which, as it were, a specific configuration of power carrying with its particular historical legacies is, for however long or short a time, congealed” (Crehan 1997:27). The first principle was that private property – and particularly landed private property – was sacred; the second, that subaltern groups should never be allowed into hegemonic alliances, to the detriment of the dominant class fractions in contention; and the third, that
coercion more than consent should always govern the relations between dominant and subaltern groups, but that the levels of coercion should never be allowed to become class-on-class open confrontation, what Darío Euraque (1996) recognizes as the cycles of “reform and reaction” of the Honduran political system.

Since at least 1956, every military coup in Honduras has been related to the breaching of one of these principles, including the ousting of Manuel Zelaya in 2009. According to mainstream lore (as presented for example by Di Iorio 2010; Martínez 2010), the main reasons behind the 2009 coup, were that Zelaya had promoted a political climate of confrontation between social groups and intended to mimick his “friend” Hugo Chávez, create a communist regime in Honduras, and rewrite the constitution to remain in power beyond his presidential period. It is worth noting that one of the initial reasons for Zelaya to approach the Venezuelan government – and Petrocaribe more specifically – was the generalized resistance he encountered domestically to his attempts to lower fuel prices by renegotiating the formula by which the costs of oil imports were calculated.

Early in the 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Marx (2008) mentions that history tends to repeat itself, “once as tragedy, and again as farce.” This formulation appears to hold perfectly well for the Honduran case. One of the first things that the newly elected president Juan Orlando Hernández did, once he took office in January 2014, was to propose a change in the way in which oil imports are calculated, so as to lower the domestic prices of fuels. Moreover, in this very different, post-coup context the idea of changing the constitution as to legalize the presidential reelection was openly discussed and even agreed upon –including in a very public debate in the national press. Irony aside, what this shows is that it was not necessarily Zelaya’s specific policies or proposals that led to his ousting, but rather the manner in which they were advocated. Zelaya’s response to the refusal by most of the traditional sectors, organized around the two party system, to support what by almost any standard were visibly reformist and hardly radical policies, pushed him towards the only ally that he found: the social movements. With
this “turn to the left” by Zelaya – as this alliance is usually dubbed –, came a significant shift in his rhetoric and his way of doing politics, as the government relied more and more on popular mobilization in the streets and on Venezuelan petrodollars in the bank.

However, it is not enough to say that Zelaya – in a similar manner to Villeda Morales in 1963 – violated the principles of the Honduran passive revolution and that was that. Since at least the 1990s, molecular changes within the dominant groups had come to deeply transform the political landscape and to put in question the state form of unstable equilibriums inaugurated by Carías. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, in the 1980s a group of entrepreneurs – many, such as Facussé, of Middle Eastern descent – rose within the ranks of the Honduran elites through a process of pillaging of public resources. Organized around economic activities such as textiles, finance, agroindustry and telecommunications, this “new” group was able to utilize the opportunities opened by the “neoliberal wave” to rise to the top, displace some of the traditional elites and “capture” the state structures (Meza et al. 2008) either directly – as in the election of Miguel Facussé’s nephew, Carlos Flores Facussé, as president in 1998 – or indirectly – by exercising influence through pressure groups such as APROH or the National Association of Industrialists (ANDI). This is the side of the Honduran history that should be read as a “success.”

As in the rest of Latin America, with the neoliberal turn came the opening of the national economies and an even larger emphasis on exports and the privatization of public assets. The result was an institutional structure that included both the new liberal policies and institutions, alongside older ones that had been the direct result of previous political arrangements, such as the INA and the agrarian reform legislation. At the same time, following again a continent-wide pattern, with the rise to power of the new dominant bloc, the old logic of checks and balances between classes and fractions of classes as the form of legitimation of the state was discarded in favor of short-term social and economic compensatory measures. This of course meant the
unraveling of historical understandings about the relations between subaltern and dominant groups, as well as increasing reliance on coercion to secure domination.

Nowhere was this unraveling felt stronger than in the agrarian sector. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, in the 1990s the approval of the LMA opened up the door for a massive transfer of lands from the reform sector to a small group of private entrepreneurs. This can and should be read as a breach of the “moral economy” (Watts 2013; Scott 1977) that had come to regulate relations between peasants and state since at least Carías. But also, both the LMA – and its predecessor, the LTP – should be seen as attempts by the elites to expand the realm of private ownership to the detriment of national and collective forms of property. This necessarily created a whole new layer of conflict in the Honduran countryside.

Movements such as MARCA embarked on long and strenuous processes to reclaim what they deemed had been illegally taken from them. But many other “new” peasant movements – such as the MCR – targeted lands that they recognized as “national” – since under the former legal framework agrarian reform lands had to remain within the reform sector even when they had been “privatized” under the LMA.

It would be wrong to write off these types of clashes as based on the peasant organizations’ lack of knowledge. One of the aspects that struck me most during my fieldwork was how much these organizations knew about the lands they were “recuperating.” They always knew how large they were, who were the supposed owners and under which principles of the agrarian legislation they could be claimed. I remember speaking with a peasant organizer about land that they wanted to recuperate from the Honduran Livestock Fund (Fondo Ganadero) on the left bank of the Aguán River. He could tell me precisely how much land was involved and that they were targeting the land ceiling of close to 600 hectares. He also knew that they would probably be evicted soon after entering, but for him this was a just cause, as those were former agrarian reform lands and they were poor families in need of land.
I would argue that rather than a lack of knowledge, these points of friction suggest differential temporalities operating at the same time. While the new property regime inaugurated under the LMA operates on a temporal understanding of “from now on” – erasing former social understandings of what is legal and desirable—, peasant organizations operate with a longer historical perspective in which their claims hark back to how things were and how they should be. It was this deeper historical perspective that Manuel Zelaya evoked –probably unknowingly– with Decree 18-2008 and his general approach to the countryside. It is within this tension between breached moral economy, uneven temporalities and the remaining sediments of older institutional equilibriums that the ongoing wave of agrarian conflicts in the Aguán should be understood. And it is within this longer history of the problematic of hegemony that the relationship between land and power becomes evident when read along the thread of land rent.

The historian Adolfo Gilly (2007:358) has argued that at the core of the dispute at the end of the Mexican Revolution between the “ranchers dressed as generals” – Obregón and his allies – and Zapata and the peasant army of the south – which resulted in the creation of famous article 27 of the new constitution – was the question about who would enjoy the country’s ground rent. For him,

It was not about resolving the simplistic question of whether there was going to be a market or not... It was about deciding whether the land, patrimony of the entire nation, was going to be in the market, was going to be the object of private commercial transactions and, in consequence, if land rent was going to stop being in practice the patrimony of the nation and become the individual private property of a few people.

And it is here that we return to the myth of the rich and impoverished country. Myths, as any historical narrative that pretends to operate upon the common sense of a society, are open to different interpretations depending on the social position from which they are read. The rich but impoverished country myth is no exception. In my time in Honduras I encountered various reworkings of the same idea. While there seems to be a national consensus regarding the
country’s natural riches and potential for development, there is a conflict about the reasons for its poverty. From the perspective of the elites, the problem continues to be the deficient quality of the Honduran laboring subject – its lack of ingenuity and industriousness, its laziness and tendency towards corruption – and the absence of national capital to tap into those riches. In the case of those versions that I heard from peasants and members of various social movements, the problem rather, was that those riches were hoarded by limited group of foreigners, such as Facussé.

To phrase it differently and being more formulaic, with the further penetration of capitalist relations in the form of the privatization of land, a whole social map of arrangements and forms of understanding regarding the position of both subaltern and dominant groups began to crumble. Public land had historically been the patrimony of the nation’s poor; once this came into question, the whole idea upon which hegemonic had been built since at least Carías, was also questioned, sharpening the edges of the points of contact between classes.

**Strand 2: agrarian reform as labor capture**

...what the Savages exhibit is the continual effort to prevent chiefs from being chiefs, the refusal of unification, the endeavor to exorcise the One, the State. It is said that the history of peoples who have history is the history of class struggle. It might be said, with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the State.

– Pierre Clastres (1989:218), *Society Against the State*

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2010:23) argues that the one characteristic shared by most peasantries in the world is the struggle for autonomy. According to him, this struggle

...aims at and materializes as the creation and development of a self-controlled and self-managed resource base, which in turn allows for those forms of co-production of man and living nature that interact with the market, allow for survival and for further prospects and feed back into and strengthen the resource base, improve the process of co-production, enlarge autonomy and, thus, reduce dependency.

For him, this fight for autonomy is a constant and never ending process where “...maintaining – that is, actively reconstructing – autonomy becomes a central and universal
“Continuity is by no means assured: it has to be repeated created and recreated. There is no security whatsoever offered by others, and former successes are no guarantee for the future” (p. 36).

Further, “[i]t places labour centre stage, linking it with self-controlled and partly self-shaped resources and with the notion of getting ahead. The specificity of this core becomes clear when compared with other modes of crafting ways forward. Getting ahead is understood within the peasant condition to be the result of one’s own labour” (p. 35).

Autonomy understood in these terms is never a given, it has to be constantly produced and struggled over. It is not a story of success either, as peasants usually find themselves in situations of subjugation and domination. According to Eric Wolf’s (1966) now classic definition of the peasantry, it is exactly in the uneven relations with larger wholes – the state for example – that we should read the history of peasants.

From this standpoint, the variety of peasants is dazzling. From the peasants under siege described by Kligman and Verdery (2011) in communist Romania, to the Guatemalan Q’eqchi’ indigenous peasants analyzed by Grandia (2012), what we find is this very ingrained notion that being able to control one’s own labor process and enjoy the fruits of this labor is central to their being in the world.

111 “Rural Romanian status ideals held that a complete and worthy person must control his labor process and its product... Collectivization meant losing possession of one’s land and animals losing the resources that attracted other people into one’s networks, losing control over one’s work and harvest and, perhaps, most important, losing the ability to provide adequately for one’s family” (Kligman and Verdery 2011:453).

112 “The Q’eqchi’ desire for land stemmed not from some abstract wish for property ownership but, as migrants routinely explained to me, ‘to find a place to work.’ As one settler elaborated, ‘Oh yes, I came here to work. Anyone comes [here] from somewhere else wants a place to work – to plant his beans, his root crops, his banana trees.’ No longer willing to accept the exploitation of life as worker-serfs on coffee plantations or sharecroppers on cattle ranches, they emphasized that they wanted to work for themselves” (Grandia 2012:65).
Particularly important for the point that I would like to make is that we can locate almost a continuum in terms of the relation between mobility and the struggle for autonomy by different peasantries: from very “rooted” “...country people who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution” (Womack 1968:ix) in southern Mexico; passing through migrating slash and burn agricultural practices – such as those described by Grandia (and by me) in Central America – to the nomadic groups of hunters and gatherers described by Pierre Clastres (1989) in the Paraguayan jungles.

However, there is a tendency in the scholarly work dedicated to peasant studies to focus on those families and groups whose reaction to dispossession is organization. The result is that very few studies (for example, Grandia 2012; Breman 1996) pay attention to the experiences and histories of those who decide to migrate rather than stay. As a result, we know much about agrarian conflict as it takes place in particular settings, but little about the strategies of flight and the impact that they can have in the broader context of the agrarian question (for example, denying the capture of labor by capital).

More than twenty years ago Liisa Malkki (1992) suggested that there is a strong tendency within anthropology to approach the topic of mobility – be it “voluntary” migration or “involuntary” displacement – from the perspective of “rootedness.” According to her, a fixed relationship between nation-state, culture and society is taken for granted. Thus, “…people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness” (p. 27). The result: “[o]ur sedentarist assumptions about attachment to place lead us to define displacement not as a fact about sociopolitical context, but rather, as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced” (p. 33).

This bias is also applicable to agrarian and peasant studies, where mobility – whether migration, displacement or flight – is taken to be a pathology, as something outside the norm and that should be corrected. The result is a set of analytical scopes that tend to either avoid the anomaly – paying little attention to those who decide to leave –, or to approach it as “problem”
to be solved (how many rural development projects are aimed at stopping the outmigration of people from their communities?).

Since Malkki is more interested in the linguistic and representational effects of this bias, she does not present a satisfying explanation as to why it happens. Let me offer one directly related to the topic at hand. As James Scott (1998; 2009) following Foucault has argued in some of his work, one of the central characteristics of statecraft has been making society legible. That is, “...to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion” (1998:2).

This making legible necessarily includes a process of technical simplification by which what is normal, and what is not, is defined and enforced. The resulting standpoint – this “seeing like a state” or “methodological statism” – is fundamentally sedentary and very much organized around the idea of rootedness. As a result, those forms of being in the world that do not fall within the matrix of legibility – the vagabond, the nomad, and the “subsistence”-oriented household – have to either be “fixed” and brought in line, or rendered invisible and disappeared.

In terms of the literature on agrarian and peasant studies, the most glaring effect of this methodological statism is the bias in favor of organization, as against flight, when analyzing the response of the peasantry to dynamics of dispossession.¹¹³

Instead of beginning our inquiry by presupposing that peasants want to remain in one single place, I propose that we explore the specific ways in which concrete peasantries navigate between remaining rooted or relocating in their struggle for autonomy and the securing of subsistence, in the terms given to this notion by Pierre Clastres (1989:195)

¹¹³ Think of all the literature that focusses on peasant struggle and organization (Wolf 1969; Paige 1978; Guha 1999; Womack 1968; Moore 1966; Edelman 1999), or even the now famous “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985), and how much smaller is the amount of work that focuses on migration in relation to agrarian struggle (for example, Arizpe 1980; Aguirre Beltrán 1967; Breman 1996; Edelman 2008).
Men work more than their needs require only when forced to... The term, subsistence economy, is acceptable in describing the economic organization of those societies [where men do not work beyond their necessities], provided it is taken to mean not the necessity that derives from a lack... but the contrary: the refusal of a useless excess, the determination to make productive activity agree with satisfaction of needs.\footnote{For a similar argument see Marshall Sahlin’s (1972) \textit{Stone Age Economics}.}

This dynamic and the tensions that come with it, is what I try to apprehend with the notion of labor capture. Under capitalism, value is mainly produced by human labor. Ground rent, its capture and the political framework – that reified set of political practices that we call state – built around it to regulate and police it, would not exist without the capturing of human labor. As I began arguing in Chapter 1 – but continued to elaborate in later chapters – labor power is never already there; it must be cultivated and assembled. For this to happen the would-be workers – men and women – must first be separated from their ability to self-provision; this is a necessary, albeit not sufficient condition. Subjectively, this new “freed” subject must also come to understand herself as a worker. The connection of these material and subjective processes is at the core of Marx’s formulation of primitive accumulation which, as I argued in Chapter 1 following Gidwani (2008a; 2008b), is a process fraught with tensions and anxieties, as there is always the possibility that labor might not be there for its exploitation by capital – as George Henderson (1998) and Don Mitchell (1996) so eloquently show for the case of immigrant workers in California.

Yann Moulier-Boutang (2006), in \textit{From Slavery to Wage Labor}, tracks the normative and institutional forms through which the idea of wage labor was constituted as part of a long process that predates the rise of capitalism itself. According to Moulier-Boutang, wage labor is only one of the various forms of subordinate labor that have been used by capitalism to attend to its central and ever present challenge of immobilizing the body of the worker – “bridling” him, tying him to the labor relation, preventing his flight, the breach of contract – be it formal or informal – and refusing to work for others and becoming legible under the rubric of the state.
One of his central conclusions is that within global capitalism, wage labor has coexisted with other forms of exploitation in an often unstable and changing manner, with “unfree” and wage labor usually occupying complementary positions in the grand scheme of disciplining subaltern classes within a vast field of strategies.

I understand as labor capture the forms in which these two processes – primitive accumulation and labor bridling – overlap and come together to place certain groups in a relation of subordination and labor exploitation in relation to capital. Further, I argue that the tension between labor capture – a never ending process that constantly must be reenacted – and flight – the never ending attempts by subaltern groups to escape capture – has a distinct geographical pattern in which mobility – rather than rootedness – should be seen as the norm and not the exception.

In chapters 1 and 2 I showed how migration as flight was the constant response by Honduran peasant and indigenous subaltern groups to the threat of capture. Further, we saw how in the 1960s and 1970s, the expansion of capitalist relations of production and the expansion and diversification of the export economy placed severe stress on the traditional survival strategies of peasant and indigenous communities in both the southern and western sections of the country. Manifested in the form of land encroachment and concentration by the elites, this stress was expressed in the increasing necessity of households to look for wage labor to complement their domestic production and provisioning.

This process of monetization was “domesticated” (Carney and Watts 1990), transforming the internal dynamics of the household. The traditional lazuro inheritance system – very much ingrained in the spatial dynamics of these subaltern groups – gave way to forms of fragmentation of the land; more and more, unpaid and paid labor came to be differentiated and with it, women’s work was devalued and rendered invisible as domestic and reproductive. Access to land became also more monetized, as the only way for impoverished new families to access it was through rent. At the same time that households became bridled through wage labor
and tenancy agreements, women became bridled to the domestic space, with ever decreasing levels of personal autonomy and control over the household’s provisioning.

It was in this context of generalized dispossession that the men and women that I spoke to in the Aguán began the journey east, in search of a piece of land and a better life. However, if dispossession was necessarily at the root of their migration, the actual route and pattern of this migration was defined by the decision between flight and organization back in their home regions. For those who chose organization, the result was their inclusion in the Bajo Aguán Project and their induced migration towards the valley’s lowlands. For those who selected flight, it translated into a long process of phased migration towards the hills. I will refer briefly to both processes.

The 1960s and 1970s was a period of both increasing land encroachment and of mobilization of peasants trying to maintain their access to land. Access to land was, as we saw, crucial for Cariás’s “peace and order” scheme and for the Honduran passive revolution in general. In response to this increasing conflict and as part of an international context framed by the U.S. inspired and bankrolled Alliance for Progress, the Honduran government promoted a sweeping agrarian reform. As we saw in chapter 2, the objectives of this agrarian reform were twofold: on the one hand, diffusing the hotspots of social and political unrest in the countryside. On the other, to transform the “traditional” agriculture sector and make the peasantry into efficient and market-oriented producers, in order for development in the countryside to flourish and impact positively the nation as a whole.

Based on a process that combined active peasant pressure on the ground with a sympathetic and supportive government, the agrarian reform distributed extensive amounts of land to peasants organized in market-oriented production cooperatives. At the same time, through a set of mechanisms that included particular requirements, training, direct intervention and using debt and coercion as leverage, it also became a massive process of peasant disciplining and labor capture. Peasant men used to working mostly by themselves and with the freedom of
deciding what and how to produce were forced to work collectively and under strict forms of discipline and surveillance.

These peasant cooperatives were born in debt, as they had both to pay back the state for the lands and from the beginning were given cheap credits to jumpstart production and invest in machinery; in this way they became bridled labor with little autonomy. In the case of the Aguán and the BAP, most cooperatives began producing what they knew best: milpa. However, after Hurricane Fifi destroyed most of their crops, debt was used to turn them into oil palm producers. This change was not only dramatic in subjective terms, it also meant that the value that they produced was extracted in the form of rent. In this sense, the 1981 strike to gain control over COAPALMA – described in Chapter 3 – should be read as an attempt by the peasant cooperatives to gain control over a larger portion of the value that they produced and reenact the struggle for autonomy and subsistence that I mentioned before.

Just as in the case of the 1960s and 1970s cycle of dispossession, the creation of the cooperatives and the development of the reform sector in the Aguán was also domesticated. As the peasant households became bridled to the cooperatives, their provisioning became ever more monetized, as the extensions of land dedicated to oil palms expanded, to the detriment of staple crop production. Men became wage laborers for the cooperatives and COAPALMA in all but name, at the same time that women lost their tenuous foothold on subsistence and became bridled to the domestic sphere; here we can see clearly the complementary manner in which paid and unpaid labor operated together to discipline these households, as Eugenia’s testimony so eloquently shows in Chapter 3.

By the time the LMA was approved in the early 1990s, the different points of rent capture within and among the cooperatives had created a process of differentiation that eroded the reform sector’s unity; with a few successful oil palm cooperatives affiliated with COAPALMA surrounded by a sea of poverty that included both oil palm and staple crop producing cooperatives. At the national scale, rising businessmen such as Miguel Facussé had managed to
amass significant amounts of money in detriment of the state,\textsuperscript{115} which once the legal floodgates were opened, flooded into the region along the cracks left by the internal processes of differentiation and fractioning of the reform sector. The result was the concentration and privatization of most of the lands distributed during the agrarian reform period in the hands of a few businessmen and transnational companies.

Not enough attention has been paid to the role that the 1960s-70s cycle of dispossession and the BAP played in creating the conditions of possibility for the development of today’s Honduran palm oil industry. As I argue at the end of Chapter 3, most of the focus has been placed on the number of hectares that were transferred, not on the objectified and living labor that had been assembled and cultivated upon those same hectares. Roads, levees, the felling of the forests, the process of planting, the building of the extracting mills — this is only a part of the objectified labor that the new palm men acquired with the lands. Families cultured in the rhythms, practices and language of the palm oil industry were “freed” from the cooperatives, but remained bridled to the oil palms. As Eugenia somberly mentioned in Chapter 3, the ability — and the desire, I must add — to produce milpa has been lost by a younger generation that was literally born under the shadow of the oil palms.

This tension between milpa as a form of “escape agriculture” (Scott 2009) and oil palms as the enactment of capital and labor capture points to the fruitfulness of reconstructing the social history of particular crops for analyzing agrarian transformations. Particularly interesting is how by studying the ways in which they are cultivated, promoted and contested, as well as identifying the sort of dreams, notions and ideas that are attached to them, we can look at the articulation between the material and subjective in particular sites. Phrased differently, by

\textsuperscript{115} Both Alexander Segovia and William Robinson (Segovia 2004; 2005; Robinson 2003) characterize the 1990s and the process of structural adjustment programs, as one of transnationalization in which a new economic elite emerged with strong links with financial capital. These are the real “winners” of the neoliberal turn.
looking at the history of a single crop – understood as enmeshed in several simultaneous space
times – we are able to analyze some of the ecological, social, cultural, political and economic
aspects of the history of a particular region (see for example, Grossman 1998; Soluri 2009;
Rogers 2010). My analysis of the oil palm just begins to scratch the surface of the potentiality
that this sort of approach could provide. For example, as I mentioned in chapter 3, at the same
time that the BAP was being developed in Honduras, similar schemes were also being promoted
in different parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Comparative work that explores how this
crop was introduced and how the palm oil industry has grown around it could prove to be a very
fruitful way of analyzing how capital and agriculture have interacted and mixed in such diverse
political and economic contexts.

Also, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, the 1990s cycle of primitive accumulation was deeply
gendered, as men and women experienced, reasoned and reacted to the process in different
ways. Due to their position as workers in the fields, men experienced the whole process of
development and later loss of the cooperatives from the perspective of work, wages and poverty.
At the same time, women – due to their bridling to the domestic sphere – experienced the
process from the perspective of the subsistence, wellbeing and autonomy of their households.
There was nothing natural about this differentiation; it was the clear result in which
monetization and dispossession positioned each one in regards to the overarching processes.
When thought about together, these two experiences give us a more rounded perspective of the
shared experience of dispossession of these households.

Not all households accepted this fate. Particularly those from the western section of the
country, who had less experience with wage labor than their southern counterparts and who
were used to a cooler climate, found the rigors of the Aguán’s lowlands and the cooperatives too
oppressive and moved up the hills in search of “free” lands. Over time, this process created a
tension between the lowlands – as a place of discipline and wage labor – and the hills – as a
space of freedom but poverty. In the hills, they intermixed with the various waves of families
that had arrived to the Aguán outside of the framework of the BAP. It is here that we connect with the history of those families who instead of organization chose flight as their response to the cycle of dispossession back home. Attracted by the supposedly good wages and free land to be found on the north coast, many families began a slow journey that eventually led them to the Aguán. The rhythms of this journey were punctuated by the production of nature; the decision to move from one place to another was usually preceded by a natural event such as Hurricane Fifi, the loss of the land’s fertility due to slash and burn agriculture or finding out that the supposedly free land ended up not being so free after all when the legal owner would displace them. The routes of these migration flows were structured by kinship, as in most cases households would relocate to places where members of their extended kin network were living.

With the exception of works by Angel Castro (1994) and Peter Marchetti (1998), the history of these groups – as well as that of the dwellers in the region before the arrival of the BAP – has been effaced. In Chapter 5 I argued that this was connected to the fact that their trajectory was the result of the flight from capture, and thus, in a sense, they were outside the purview of the state. If this is the case – and here I am navigating close to the work of Clastres (1989) and Scott (2009) –, then for a long period of time, they were probably the most interested party in not being seen and surveyed. At the same time, it does raise the question as to why they changed their behavior in the aftermath of Mitch. How was it that a group of families, so zealous about their autonomy and distance in regard to labor capture and the state, decide one day to come down from the hills, recuperate land and create new communities, putting their lives on the line?

Before the 1990s the tension between capture and flight created a geographical pattern based on the understanding that free land existed and was available for the poor somewhere else. The BAP and the informal flows of migration towards the Aguán were predicated upon this idea. As we saw in Chapter 2, towards the end of the 1980s, the idea of the unlimited free lands was coming to a close, as the only way of accessing lands was moving further and further up the
mountains; by the 1990s even this alternative disappeared, with the intensified efforts of COHDEFOR to enforce forestry protection. After Mitch and under these conditions, the choice between flight and organization was presented yet again for many families. In part due to the organizing work of the Catholic Church in the hills, in part due to a sense that no other alternative was open to them, most of the families that flocked to the Nueva Vida and Guadalupe Carney communities were those who, probably for the first time in their lives, chose organization over flight. As we can see, there is nothing natural about the shift that is clearly informed by a change in the broader context in which the struggle for autonomy and subsistence had to be framed and understood.

This is not to say that flight was not also a viable option. Unlike El Salvador and Guatemala, Honduran migration towards the U.S. only took off in the 1990s. This is usually explained in connection with the crisis of international coffee prices and the effects of neoliberal policies (Reichman 2011; Puerta 2005; Sladkova 2007). I do not know of a single work that explores the possible connections between these increased levels of international migration and the shift in the national agrarian understanding, from unlimited free lands to a sense of enclosure. When comparing notes with Sergio Salazar – a fellow anthropologist who is studying the experience of Central American immigrants in their transit through Mexico – the similarities between how today’s Honduran migrants make sense of their journey towards the U.S. and the testimonies that I collected regarding the reasons for leaving for the Aguán are strikingly similar. A longer historical perspective that links internal with international migration and processes of dispossession with the production of nature would be an interesting approach to shedding light on the current exodus of Hondurans – and Central Americans more broadly – towards the U.S.

**Strand 3: the overdetermination of the palm oil monoculture**

Monocultures, we are told, are bad for the environment. They destroy biodiversity and with it the nourishment of various species; they attract plant diseases and dry up water sources; they
displace the production of staple crops and populations and diminish the social resilience of communities (Adger 2000; Altieri 2009; Carrere 2006; Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). Little to no attention is given in most of this literature to the ways of being on the world – and the common sense that accompanies them – that are also created alongside these plantations. This is the reason that I find Vandana Shiva’s (1993:12) formulation *Monocultures of the Mind* so revealing. According to Shiva, the introduction of Western scientific agricultural knowledge and practice has rendered invisible other local ecological knowledges and practices that are labeled “traditional” or “primitive.” Further,

...the dominant system also makes alternatives disappear by erasing and destroying the reality which they attempt to represent... It is eclipsed along with the world to which it relates. Dominant scientific knowledge thus breeds a monoculture of the mind by making space for local alternatives disappear, very much like monocultures of introduced plant varieties leading to the displacement and destruction of local diversity. Dominant knowledge also destroys the very conditions for alternatives to exist, very much like the introduction of monocultures destroying the very conditions for diverse species to exist.

Without trying to interpret too much, the idea of connecting agricultural scientific and technical knowledge, with commonsense understandings of the world is quite revealing. At the end of Chapter 5, I described how the Aguán has become oversaturated by palm oil: how the everyday life of most communities in the lowlands of the valley is defined by their relations with the plantations; how the regional identity is organized around the palm trees; how this crop is seen as the only viable economic and ecological alternative for the particular conditions of the Aguán. If the muscle behind this move came in the form of the debt trap and the leverage that the INA had on the cooperatives (Chapter 3), it was also the result of the constant preaching by agronomists and the press about the ecological conditions of both the region and the oil palm. It also relates to the daily observation by the local dwellers, that once the rain levels came up, the only things safe were the palm trees.

This observation is, I think, important. At the beginning of Chapter 3, after I introduced the idea of the palm oil assemblage – borrowing from Michael Watt’s (2012b) formulation of the
“oil assemblage” – I proposed using Gramsci’s (1971:352) take on how men acquire a particular conception of the world. According to him, “[t]he humanity which is reflected in each individuality is composed of various elements: 1. the individual; 2. other men; 3. the natural world.” It is in these terms – along these three elements – that I understand the process of absorption of the oil palm monoculture into the minds of the residents of the Aguán. From this perspective, it becomes important to explore not only the ways in which political economy and ecology interact – the political ecology maxim –, but also the ways in which these interactions are appropriated, internalized and made sense of by local populations. Further, how these understandings – seen from the three levels proposed by Gramsci – produce the force field upon which both domination and contestation take place (Roseberry 1994).

However, to leave things here would never do. According to Haroon Akhram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay (2010a; 2010b), rather than a single agrarian question, we should think about a diversity of different agrarian questions, ranging from approaches such as political ecology, feminism and historical path dependencies. However, if we boil it down to the basics, the agrarian question refers to the ways in which capital penetrates agriculture and attempts – but rarely completely succeeds – in turning the fields into factories.

Seen from this perspective, the agrarian question turns into the exploration of how a cash crop such as oil palm operates on the ground, and we need to understand how labor, capital and land are assembled to allow for capital accumulation. Or, as George Henderson (1998:x) phrases it, “[t]he point would seem, is that capital and nature are webs of constraint and confinement that must be carefully recast as fields of opportunity. To be sure, the resulting alchemy can be as volatile as it can be profitable.”

As I discuss in Chapter 3, palm oil is the most used vegetable oil in the world and – due to its variable uses – the oil palm is the quintessential flex crop. However, this profitability is predicated upon a set of conditions defined by the production process. As I show in that same chapter, these conditions give the palm oil industry various particularities (nursing period of
two years before production begins, the need to harvest the fresh fruit, difficulties in mechanizing, among others). As a result, the palm oil industry has become at different moments and in different ways, the peg on which development dreams have been hung. During the 1970s the IFIs and the FAO proposed that it was a viable option for improving both national food security conditions and for promoting domestic industrialization. Under this logic, various colonization and development projects, such as the BAP in Honduras and FELDA in Malaysia, were promoted and bankrolled by the World Bank and the IADB. By the 1990s, when the LMA was approved, the industry was well established in the country. However, as we saw in Chapter 3, due to the fall in the international prices at this time, oil palm cultivation was not necessarily a profitable activity for those dedicated solely to the production of the raw material. It is in part due to this situation – among the others that I present in that chapter – that the cooperatives could be bought and sold so cheaply. What this suggests is the close linkage between the global dynamics of accumulation and the constraints and opportunities on the ground for different actors such as Facussé or the peasant organizations.

If we were to construct a continuum that goes from self-sufficient peasants to fully proletarianized rural wage laborers, where would we locate the peasant cooperatives and EACs created within the framework of the Honduran agrarian reform? Probably somewhere in between, but at the same time outside of the continuum. Let me elaborate. Outside, because as George Henderson (1998:77) contends, “...what becomes capital can in fact originate from outside the social relations of production of capitalism per se, outside the relations whereby capitalists otherwise extract value in labor processes they would control.”

Following Kalyan Sanyal (2013) I proposed in chapter 3 that we think about the Honduran agrarian reform peasant cooperatives as need economies. That is, forms of economic enterprises that operate within the M-C-M’ circuit, but where the surplus created (M’), is not used for accumulation’s sake (thrown into circulation again to create further profits), but rather, used to secure the provisioning of its members, as well as restarting the cycle anew. Thus, the
cooperative operates as both employer and employee and, as we saw in chapter 3, is thus susceptible to forms of internal exploitation, due to the free rider problem or other forms of rent capture. At the same time, just as in Chayanov’s (1966) characterization of the peasant household, but on a larger scale, cooperatives are at the same time units of production and consumption. Finally, we cannot forget either the forms of subjugation that women suffer within the cooperatives, as their domestic labor is not recognized or their access to resources such as land and credit is blocked.

However, these needs economies also operate – as in the cases of the promotion of oil palm plantations in South East Asian and Africa – as forms of contract farming. In this sort of schemes, “[t]he grower [the cooperatives] lends to the production process his/her labour power and the effective property within his/her possession. The contractor [the INA or COAPALMA] provides some of the production inputs, participates in production decisions and supervision, and holds title to the product” (Watts 1992:91).

When it operates properly – as seen the case in countries such as Malaysia (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; Robertson 1984) – contract farming schemes allow the contractor to have significant control over the production process, defining what is to be produced and how. In the case of the Aguán, we saw how mainly through debt, the INA managed to force the hand of the cooperatives and turn them towards the cultivation of oil palms. Also, how with the creation of COAPALMA there was an attempt to both vertically integrate the industry in the region and bring under a shorter leash the cooperatives. However, the peasant cooperatives in an attempt at retaining a larger portion of the value created, went on strike to gain control over the new second level cooperative in 1981. There was nothing anti-systemic or revolutionary about this strike; it had nothing to do with rejecting the vertical integration of the industry or fighting to produce something different. Quite plainly, the cooperatives went on strike trying to renegotiate their position in the market, making sure that the lion’s share of the value produced by the industry would remain in the region.
It would seem that there is a close relation between vertical integration and a control grab. As COAPALMA consolidated itself in the region, the process of differentiation between cooperatives accelerated and – as I argued in the case of the San Isidro cooperative – many cooperatives were more willing to sell to “foreigners” such as Facussé than to submit to the monopsony power that the second level cooperative began to have in the Aguán. This same situation repeated itself in the aftermath of the 2009 coup and the negotiations between MUCA and Facussé, and the rejection of the former to the latter’s co-investment proposal. In this case I would argue that the rejection had little to do with an innate rejection of selling to Facussé or of wanting to move away from oil palm monoculture. Rather, what was in play was the capacity to sell their production to the highest bidder. The struggle for autonomy and subsistence in this context is clearly mediated by the market, the overstructuring of the oil palm monoculture and the desire to operate as successful need economies.

This characterization of the agrarian reform cooperatives as need economies stuck between the struggle for autonomy and subsistence, on the one hand, and forms of contract farming on the other, calls out for a broader and more in-depth analysis of different forms of collective and cooperative labor and their articulation with capital. From important players within the U.S.’s corporate agricultural sector (Sheingate 2003; Cook 1995), through the phenomenon of “repeasantization (van der Ploeg 2010), all the way to Marx’s letter to Zasulich regarding the revolutionary potential of the Russian obschchina (Shanin 1983) and as a potential space for anarchist and emancipatory practices (De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2010; Vieta 2010), cooperatives and similar forms of collective labor animate the imagination of scholars. However, little discussion between these different characterizations and the political practices that come with them exists.

One final point regarding the oil palm monoculture has to do with the issue of alternatives. According to Shiva, the monocultures of the mind have the effect of destroying the possibility of thinking about alternatives to dominant thought. Certain realities become reified
and naturalized and the field within which alternatives can be thought of becomes very limited. This is very much what happens in the Aguán. Not only does any political project have to take into account the palm oil industry – as it overdetermines the region –, but most of the political projects that actually exist revolve around palm trees. I already showed in Chapter 5 how all of the peasant movements that were created in the region in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch have ended up involved in oil palm production as the only viable activity. For example, in the last few years, MUCA – in close alliance with the Vía Campesina – has been propounding a political discourse around the idea of food sovereignty. When one looks at their practice, however, what one finds are various attempts to diversify their production beyond oil palms that all fall short of creating an economically viable provisioning alternative for the movement. Further, when speaking to both leadership and base, it becomes obvious that there is a clear commitment and understanding that only through their articulation to the palm oil industry will they be able to pay their debts and improve their living conditions.

For me, one of the biggest questions that this study leaves open is how might a common sense – such as the one that has been created in the Aguán regarding the palm oil monoculture – be interrupted or at least destabilized so as to create a space from which different modes of thinking can arise? How can alternative narratives be constructed against the backdrop of such a dominant material, political and cultural presence?

Without trying to answer this question, I would like to propose an entry point into this problem from Gramsci’s (1971:348) take on “common sense.” According to him, common sense is a set of immediate, unconnected facts just taken for granted and non-critical assertions on reality and the “way in which things are.” Common sense is conservative and helps preserve the status quo, under the idea that things are “naturally” like they are. So common sense is false, in so far as it is unable to grasp the concrete relations and forces that create that reality, and presents what is the result of political will as natural. In the Aguán case, this means believing
that there are no alternatives to oil palms, without realizing that the overdetermination of the industry over the region was produced in particular ways by particular actors.

However, within common sense there are certain elements that, since they are anchored to concrete human experience, can be organized to approach reality and go beyond common sense; this is what Gramsci refers to as “good sense.” Good sense is not in itself a critical posture, but an entry point from which organic intellectuals can work. We could say that while common sense comes mainly from “outside” of the subaltern groups, “good sense” is coming out of the concrete experience (from “inside”) the subaltern experience. For the case of the Aguán, this good sense would have to come from the peasants’ own concrete experience with the oil palm monoculture. This experience has been produced through processes of violence and dispossession, in which the fruits of their labor has never been truly their own. Violence and dispossession have not only defined their shared experience as a class, but also the ways in which they relate to each other – in their gender relations, for example – and to their surrounding environment.

These types of insights are present in the region. Towards the end of my fieldwork in the Aguán, I was able to organize a collective mapping workshop with the members of the Permanent Human Rights Observatory of the Aguán (OPDH). One of the activities that we did was to approach various questions by locating their answers in a large map of the Aguán region. Two such questions were: “where have peasants been assassinated?” and “where are the oil palm plantations?” When we finished locating the different answers to the questions, we began analyzing the resulting map collectively. Alberto, the then coordinator of the OPDH turned to me and said, “Most deaths are in those places where there are palm trees.” He paused for a second and added, “the palm trees are death.” Everyone else in the room began to nod and murble their approval. “It is interesting” – he began again – “it seems that this is something that we all knew, but had never seen before.”
Strand 4: Historical narratives, between individual and collective memories

The raw material of this dissertation has been the individual memories of men and women about the process that brought them to the place where they are now. In the majority of cases, these were memories of struggle, of suffering, but also of pride and hope. Even in those moments in my writing when description fell victim to the violence of abstraction (Sayer 1989), I have tried to ground my arguments in what they told me and in what I saw. This was never a simple task. The act of remembering is always in present tense and responds more to the ways in which the past inhabits the present than to the past itself. As Portelli (2010) argues, the working of oral history is found in the connection between “facts” – what happened – and “representations” – how the subject positions itself in relation to the events. Further, as Trouillot (1995) reminds us, the process of constructing historical narratives – as well as remembering – is very much about the production of silences. There is a clear temporality to these silences; the same person might narrate the same event in different ways depending of the moment, the stage and the audience.

Taking these elements into account, the narrative that I have constructed in these pages needs to be understood as a partial one and one in which certain voices appear more forcefully than others. At the same time, it should also be seen as an effort to tease out the different narratives that circulate in the region and to try to understand the forms in which they were produced. One of the first things that caught my attention in the Aguán was how there seemed to be an “official” subaltern history of the region, one that presented the beginnings of time with the arrival of the cooperatives to an “empty” space in the 1970s. In this narrative, the cooperatives through their labor, brought down the jungle and planted the palm trees, only to fall victims to both internal corruption and the tricks and deceit of the “foreigners,” Miguel Facussé, Reinaldo Canales and René Morales. Then, after Mitch, forced by hunger and the need to right the wrongs of the past, the people began to organize, creating new organizations and recuperating the lands that had been illegally taken away from them. Finally, they were
currently in “resistance” against both the state and the terratenientes, trying to survive and leave something for their children. As I spent more time in the region and spoke with people from different sectors and groups, it became evident to me that behind this “official” subaltern history, were many others that had been rendered invisible. For example, the idea that the history of the region begins with the arrival of the cooperatives, negates the fact that the valley had been populated many years before. Moreover, the arrival of the cooperatives had been experienced by them as a violent process of dispossession. Also, it was clear that the locus of this history was the lowlands – in the shadow of state and capital – which came to negate the experiences of the families clinging to the surrounding hills. Finally, I have shown in different parts, how this official history, and its several variations, presents a very masculine perspective, and one in which the experiences of women and their understandings of what happened are negated.

Besides showing that memories are always divided, this pointed to the importance of exploring the relation between individual and collective memories. Individual and shared experiences only become collective when they become institutionalized, that is, when they are turned into a social and political artifact that circulates in particular ways, responding to specific norms and objectives. Phrased differently, collective memories are always aimed at producing a specific historical narrative that organizes silences and remembering in particular ways. In Chapter 5, for example, I presented the two competing narratives about the early history of the Peasant Movement of Rigores (MCR). I showed how there was a certain correlation between the general objectives of the organization – creating a legitimate legal claim on the land – and the story that the movement was initially started by former members of the Unión Rigores cooperative.

With these points in mind, it becomes evident that when dealing with memories and the historical narratives of subaltern groups, it is particularly important to pay attention to the concrete forms in which individual memories become institutionalized and how they then
circulate through time and space. It is similarly important to see how behind even these “alternative” narratives, strategic silences are also always present. Here again, we find kinship as an important conduit.

In their analysis of the Maoist movement in Nepal, Gidwany and Paudel (2012:271) came to the conclusion that

...it is impossible to explain the ling history of uprisings in Thabang and the success of the Maoist insurgency that followed without close attention to the vital ideological function of extended family and kin structures, and to the political work of memory these enabled. While such peasant structures have generally been viewed with suspicion by the Left, as conservative historical forms that impede the development of revolutionary consciousness, in Nepal they served as networks of transmission for an emerging, counterhegemonical, common sense.

Family and kin networks in Thabang operated as political conduits: first, as circuits of intra-generational solidarity lubricated by the social rituals and relations of affect that accompany gatherings of extended families; and second, as intergenerational mechanisms of interpellation that insured, in one instance after another, that several generations of the same family were ideologically aligned: son and daughter to father and mother, niece and nephew to uncle and aunt, grandchild to grandfather and so on.

I found a similar situation in the Aguán, where certain families and their extended kin groups, operated as nodes of articulation and communication across space – linking different communities and movements together – and time, connecting the stories of struggle from one generation to the next. This was particularly evident in the case of the OPDHA. In general, the representatives of the different movements present in this space are of a younger generation. Many of them were born in the region and spent most of their adulthood as wage laborers in the private oil palm plantations, housewives or as teachers and construction workers. However, in most cases, they are sons, daughters, nieces or grandsons of men and women that have been very politically active most of their lives. It was in part due to the stories that they heard at home that this younger generation decided to join the different peasant movements in the region. This intergenerational transmission was also very much obvious in the great care that they take to
raise their kids in the same manner that they were raised; repeating the stories that they heard and teaching by example how things are supposed to be done.

It seems to me that it is in these registers – oral history and kinship – where we can find the transmission belts that link the different episodes of subaltern rebelliousness, that appear so disjointed, episodic and spontaneous from the perspective of official history and written accounts such as those of the media. “The revolt,” Adolfo Gilly tells us,

is a cut in the homogeneous time of history... It nurtures from the image of the oppressed ancestors, not of the vision of the liberated descendants... [T]he strength of the revolt without which no revolution is possible, comes from the heap of dispossessions, grievances and humiliations accumulated by successive generations. (2010:7)

“This distinction,” Gilly continues, “between revolution and rebellion... is central for the work of the historian. Because a revolution is not only what the books say or what is proposed by the programs of its leaders, above all, is what the people that rebel do” (p. 12).

I set off to the Aguán in search of the rooted peasantry in the midst of a revolutionary moment. I found neither. What I did find was a group of peasant households that took to the road time and time again in search of a piece of land and some control over their lives, that organized themselves politically time and time again in an attempt to carve out some breathing room between capital and state in the Aguán. I did not find a revolution, but what I did find was a rebellious braid of memories and stories very much worth telling.
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