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# Peasant mobilisation and democratisation in Latin America: Reducing political inequalities in *Montes de María*, 1950-2000

Sebastián De La Rosa Carriazo

Sebastián De La Rosa Carriazo [<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6402-5037>],  
Doctoral student, Faculty of Arts, KU Leuven. E-mail: [sxdelarosa@gmail.com](mailto:sxdelarosa@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

This article revisits trajectories of peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María* (northern Colombia) between 1950 and 2000. The review highlights how those trajectories implied, for those involved, negotiating disagreements and arranging collaborations in the 1980s. Upon this analysis, the article argues that these trajectories were part of a broader process of democratisation. The objective is precisely to propose a discussion about the links between peasant mobilisation and democratisation in Latin America during this period. Indeed, agrarian historians have shown that peasant mobilisation shaped formal political institutions. To complement those findings, though, the article argues for historicising democratisation also as the reduction of political inequalities. This concept of democratisation exceeds formal political institutions and is best observed in changes in social relations. In the case of *campesinos* in *Montes de María*, their efforts sought to reduce political inequalities both among them, and between them and other social actors.

**Keywords:** Peasant mobilisation, democratisation, Colombia, political inequalities, social relations.

## **Movilización campesina y democratización en América Latina: Reducir las desigualdades políticas en Montes de María, 1950-2010**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo repasa las trayectorias de movilización campesina en Montes de María (norte de Colombia) entre 1950 y 2000. Esa revisión resalta que dichas trayectorias obligaron a los actores involucrados a negociar sus diferencias y acordar colaboraciones en la década de 1980. A partir de ese análisis, el artículo establece que dichas trayectorias fueron parte de un proceso más amplio de democratización. El objetivo es entonces proponer una discusión sobre los nexos entre movilización campesina y democratización en América Latina durante este período. De hecho, historias agrarias han mostrado cómo la movilización campesina ha moldeado instituciones políticas formales. No obstante, para complementar estos hallazgos, el artículo le apuesta a historizar la democratización como reducción de desigualdades políticas. La democratización así entendida rebasa las instituciones políticas formales y se observa mejor en cambios en las relaciones sociales. Es el caso de los campesinos en Montes de María, empeñados en reducir las desigualdades políticas entre ellos mismos y con respecto a otros actores sociales.

**Palabras clave:** Movilización campesina, democratización, Colombia, desigualdades políticas, relaciones sociales.

## Introduction

This article anchors a discussion about peasant mobilisation and democratisation during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America with empirical evidence from *Montes de María* (northern Colombia).<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the historical weight of those two processes in this period is widely recognised. Peasant mobilisation is a prominent subject in agrarian histories of Latin America covering the years between the 1960s and 1990s. However, earlier works mostly disregard democratisation as a potential outcome of mobilisation. A few treat the potential connection between both superficially, contrasting the strength of peasant mobilisation in struggles against authoritarian regimes, versus its weak influence over democratic regimes (Roseberry, 1993; Zamosc and Martínez Borrego, 1997; Welch and Fernandes, 2009; van Ausdal, 2013). The outlook is broader and partially reoriented in more recent publications. This is especially evident in other disciplines than agrarian history, though. Case studies for Ecuador, Bolivia and Mexico in fact show that peasant mobilisation transformed political institutions, especially from the 1980s onwards. Most of these works emphasise changes in formal political institutions propelled by mobilisation under (fairly) democratic regimes (Cameron, 2005; van Cott, 2005).<sup>2</sup> A few historicise democratisation as an effect of peasant mobilisation. Among those, the works of Trevizo (2011) and Valdivia Rivera (2019) stand out for showing how democratisation resulted from long histories of mobilisation unfolding in pursuit of heterogeneous goals and through different means.

On the other hand, concurring with the two latter references, peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María* comprised trajectories with diverse forms and objectives. Conflicts in the microregion adjusted to changing contexts, and their outcomes inspired new disputes. Specifically, peasant mobilisation scaled up from sporadic local protests by tobacco cultivators in the 1950s, to a widespread campaign for territorial control since the late 1960s. *Campesinos* acquired heterogeneous aspirations, and negotiated them, between the 1970s and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Then, through the 2000s and 2010s, they collaborated assertively with activists, scholars and public officials to raise awareness about the violent retaliations against their mobilisation. Ultimately, *campesinos* in *Montes de María* mobilised relentlessly throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That persistence has, in turn, made the case attractive for

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<sup>1</sup> *Montes de María* is not a jurisdiction. It is called a microregion in this article for it comprises about 5.000 km<sup>2</sup>, and it is distinguishable both geographically (it sits on a small cordillera surrounded by plains) and historically (it hosts since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century a circuit of tobacco producers and traders). The microregion was inhabited predominantly by *campesinos* (see note 3) with diverse ethnic backgrounds and livelihoods throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fals Borda, 2002; UNDP et al., 2003; Hernández García, 2008; Porras Mendoza, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> A good complement to these case studies, based upon observations in Zimbabwe, is Moyo's (2001) proposal to situate the role of peasant mobilisation in democratisation also in changes outside formal political institutions. This consideration is especially relevant for the case study of *Montes de María*, in which political transformations are not contained within a single political jurisdiction.

<sup>3</sup> This article uses the terms *campesinos* (noun) and *campesina* (adjective) as a case-specific expression of the global social realities of peasants and peasantry. The latter are described in the United Nations' (2018) Declaration on the rights of Peasants and other People working in Rural Areas, as well as in multiple activist and scholarly traditions (Edelman, 2013).

historians and other social scholars (Escobar, 2002; Porras Mendoza, 2014; González Correa, 2015; Machuca Pérez, 2016; Berman-Arévalo, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, with their participation in these projects for over half a century, *campesinos* helped shaping a narrative according to which they partook in “a broader fight for the democratisation of society” (CNRR, 2010: 14). The latter statement, quoted from an influential official report, highlights the suitability of this case study as point of departure for the broader discussion proposed in this article.<sup>5</sup>

The theoretical discussion proposed and the empirical evidence reviewed are combined to argue that agrarian historians can help a better understanding of the relationship between peasant mobilisation and democratisation. The case study on *Montes de María* mainly is an agrarian history that shows specific transformations in informal political institutions. Those changes, that overall operate more at the level of social relations than within the scope of the state, are interpreted as reductions in political inequalities. The case study describes and analyses different scenarios in which peasant mobilisation in the microregion produced this type of changes. Special attention is given to the efforts of *campesinos* in the microregion to reorganise the goals and means of their mobilisation between the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The article delves into that process through transcripts of conversations with *campesinos* involved in it.<sup>6</sup> Despite following different trajectories of mobilisation, participants at the reorganisation converged to discuss the terms of collaborations among them and with other social actors. In the end, the article argues that realising how *campesinos* in *Montes de María* negotiated these changes in social relations clarifies theoretical aspects of the relationship between peasant mobilisation and democratisation.

This article ultimately ponders concrete experiences of peasant mobilisation as trajectories, and shows how these are part and parcel of processes of democratisation. For this purpose, the article starts by proposing a theoretical framework to assess the political effects of peasant mobilisation in Latin America during the period under analysis. A concept of democratisation as the reduction of political inequalities is at the core of this framework. Next, the article goes on to summarise the trajectories of peasant mobilisation that unfolded in *Montes de María* between 1950 and 2000. This overview underscores the relevance of the process of reorganisation led by *campesinos* in the microregion between the late 1970s and 1980s. A closer inspection of this process shows that *campesinos* prioritised questions of political inequality in

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<sup>4</sup> Although the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not covered in this article, it is worth mentioning that peasant mobilisation continued to drive political change in *Montes de María* during that period. CNRR (2010), Rampf (2014), Ruiz (2014) and Abitbol (2018) present interesting insights into it.

<sup>5</sup> Colombia's *Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación* (CNRR) was part of the transitional justice system enacted by *Ley 975/2005* (*Diario Oficial (D.O.)*, July 25<sup>th</sup> 2005). CNRR (2010) examined the history of peasant mobilisation and violence in *Montes de María* to show the agrarian origins of the Colombian internal armed conflict. The work of CNRR is referenced by several recent studies about *Montes de María*: Pérez Ortega, 2010; Porras Mendoza, 2014 (these two authors worked with CNRR); Ruiz, 2014; González Correa, 2015; Machuca Pérez, 2016; Molano Camargo, 2017; Berman-Arévalo, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> These transcripts are part of *Base de Datos de Luchas Campesinas (BDLC)*, a repository of research materials hosted by the *Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular* (CINEP). Most of these transcripts were recorded and edited by three scholars referred in this article: Cristina Escobar, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Leon Zamosc.

their negotiations. This exercise and its outcomes are examined to refer back to the original question: how peasant mobilisation and democratisation were connected during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America.

### **Peasant mobilisation and democratisation in Latin America, 1950s-1990s**

The first step of this exercise is to conceptualise the links between peasant mobilisation and democratisation in Latin America during the second half of the 20th century. To contextualise the proposed analysis, agrarian historians observing peasant mobilisation between the 1950s and the 1970s construed that a great historical turn was in the making. Although most of those projects failed their larger aspirations, rural Latin America experienced deep political transformations over those three decades and the following. Meanwhile, as newer agrarian histories and the case in this article show, peasant mobilisation persisted.<sup>7</sup> Against this background, the objective in this section is to discuss concisely how peasant mobilisation and those political changes were connected within broader processes of democratisation. For this, this section presents a concept of democratisation that highlights this potential link. Then, it examines the possibilities enabled by that concept to historicise the political effects of peasant mobilisation in Latin America.

The meaning of democratisation in this article echoes political theory debates sparked by political transformations taking place since the 1970s in Latin America. Most basically, democratisation refers to the transition from authoritarian political regimes to others in which majorities choose rulers in competitive elections or through similar mechanisms. This concept of democratisation is mostly concerned with formal political institutions at the national level (Huber, 1995; Geddes, 2011). However, this definition has expanded as transitions of this type occurred in most Latin American countries, as well as in other regions in the world. A key insight supporting this expansion is that formal political institutions, democratic or not, are underpinned by social relations that shape political inequalities to entail them as part of a social order. These social relations, even when most apparently private (as in the exchange of labour for wage, or the belonging to a community of interests), can explain to what extent political inequalities are tolerated by majorities and/or pushed by those who rule (O'Donnell, 1993). This theoretical development indeed resonates with analyses on the historical role of agrarian elites in preventing or mediating rural majorities' access to effective influence over who rules (basic democratisation). This is especially critical when, and as long as, cheap labour is necessary for those elites to uphold formal or informal power (Huber, 1995).

The concept of democratisation has further expanded in scholarship about Latin America building from that insight. Democratisation after transition is understood as the construction of

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<sup>7</sup> Agrarian histories of Latin America produced between the 1960s and 1980s generally assume an imminent collapse of centuries-old social relations, and a shift towards (socialist) revolution or (capitalist) development (Roseberry, 1993: 321-336). Mobilisation persisted because most *campesinos* failed to achieve either of those two paths, and the few who got there were generally disappointed (Zamosc and Martínez Borrego, 1997: 18-22; Welch and Mançano Fernandes, 2009; van Ausdal, 2013).

certain type of social relations that favour both majorities' access to ruling, and an exercise of rule that (more or less) observes political equality. Thus, democratisation means greater ability of individuals to establish horizontal social relations, by means and with the aim of contesting hierarchies, as well as of deliberating about how political power is used (Avritzer, 2002). To be sure, *campesinos* understand democratisation more often as equal access to public resources than as the construction of formal political institutions (Cameron, 2009). More importantly, the existence of egalitarian or horizontal social relations, even if not exclusively with regards to the state, becomes a central component of democratisation. These social relations are always the product of historical social constructions that seldom follow a coherent path (Valdivia Rivera, 2019). Indeed, Avritzer (2002) identifies a pattern that decentres the state: the most important drivers of democratisation in contemporary Latin America emerge in informal societal practices that enable egalitarian deliberation; the greatest challenge is the incapacity of formal political institutions to incorporate them. Following these appraisals, democratisation can be historicised as a process of reduction of political inequalities. Moreover, interactions in society also underpin political inequalities, so their reduction is not always expressed in changes in formal political institutions.

Indeed, agrarian historians of Latin America can gain two vantage points and make a key contribution by analysing democratisation as reduction of political inequalities. First, as political scientists Huber (1995) and Geddes (2011) also concede, in a long-term perspective democratisation is best indicated by changes in social relations: for instance, agrarian labour relations or alliances to cope access to power. And second, as suggested by inquiries focused on rural Latin America, democratisation can have variable reach or depth within single political jurisdictions (Cameron, 2009). For instance, Trevizo (2011) finds that peasant mobilisation in Mexico unevenly concurred between the 1970s and the 1990s with other social actors, including opponents in ongoing conflicts, on the need for more level political institutions. Meanwhile, Valdivia Rivera (2019) argues that peasant mobilisation in Bolivia effectively broadened access to formal politics without tackling inequalities within its own operational mechanisms. Trevizo (2011) and Valdivia Rivera (2019) in fact show social relations as a productive lens to analyse how peasant mobilisation democratise political institutions. Moreover, as Moyo (2001) and van Cott (2005) remind, peasant mobilisation can deliberately bypass formal politics to avoid internal and external conflicts counterproductive to their more concrete struggles.

Therefore, the concept of political inequalities is appropriate to historicise peasant mobilisation in terms of social relations between concrete actors. In line with Roseberry's (1993: 343-351) recommendations, this concept can highlight the specificities of a case study, but also enable comparisons and dialogues with larger historical dynamics. It problematises the historical experiences of *campesinos* by stressing why and how they altered specific social relations. In doing so, it highlights the variability of these changes within social groups, as well as between seemingly equivalent contexts. Also, it emphasises the particularities of the process under observation (peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María*) to better inform a broader historical

question (democratisation in Latin America).<sup>8</sup> To be clear, such an analysis also demands a precise specification of the political inequalities which are reduced, and of the actors and the mechanisms that produce such changes. Following Moyo (2001), Trevizo (2011) and Valdivia Rivera (2019), the latter can be achieved when available empirical evidence is extensively pondered and situated in its context.

### Peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María*, 1950s-1970s

As a next step, this section presents the general patterns of peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María* between the 1950s and 1970s. This period was marked by the rebound of tobacco production and exports, an economy which had transformed the microregion since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Profits from exports had allowed tobacco traders to concentrate rural property in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As exports slowed down considerably since the 1910s, though, large landowners increasingly shifted to cattle ranching. Novel conflicts surfaced in the microregion as ranching progressively curbed *campesinos'* access to agricultural land (Hernández García, 2008; Blanco Romero, 2010; Colmenares Guerra, 2017). Moreover, conflicts intensified in the 1950s due to the rapid recovery of tobacco exports, which still relied on the cheap labour of *campesina* families who cultivated and processed tobacco in exchange for their main monetary income.<sup>9</sup> Although the State initially implemented regulations to tackle those conflicts, efforts dwindled amid an abrupt change in the national political context.<sup>10</sup> The tobacco economy stayed nonetheless in good shape over the next three decades.<sup>11</sup>

The recovery of the tobacco economy in *Montes de María* unfolded simultaneously to a critical turning point for Colombia. Political institutions and agrarian economies in the country had eroded since the late 1940s amid *La Violencia*, a concurrence of social and political conflicts with effects widespread but different across regions. At State level, several entities shut down since 1949 and a military coup succeeded in 1953. Meanwhile, *campesina* families and rural economies were disproportionately affected by partisan and social violence (Bejarano, 1983; Sánchez and Meertens, 1985). As a way out, the political parties that had dominated elections

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<sup>8</sup> For van Ausdal (2013: 14-16), this dialogue with broader processes is a solid trend in Latin American agrarian history carried on since the 2000s.

<sup>9</sup> The tobacco economy in *Montes de María* involved agrarian production, in which *campesinos* cultivated and cured tobacco leaves, and basic manufacture, in which cured leaves were processed in small factories. Most conflicts in the 1950s involved tobacco cultivators (CDROFB. Guillermo Ortiz (November 1954), *Informe sobre el cultivo de tabaco en el Departamento de Bolívar*; MinAgricultura (1982). *Evolución histórica de la producción de tabaco en Colombia*).

<sup>10</sup> In 1954, the national government created the *Instituto Nacional de Fomento Tabacalero* (National Tobacco Institute) to modernise tobacco production (*Decreto 3558/1954*, D.O., December 18<sup>th</sup> 1954). With the dual objective of protecting cultivators and fostering exports, regulations for the whole sector were updated in the following years: *Decreto 2633/1955* (D.O., October 20<sup>th</sup> 1955); *Decreto 3048/1955* (D.O., December 10<sup>th</sup> 1955); *Decreto 840/1957* (D.O., July 25<sup>th</sup> 1957).

<sup>11</sup> Between 1915 and 1949, the yearly average of Colombian tobacco exports was just above 2.200 tons. (excluding periods with restricted international markets); in contrast, in the following decades it was 4.659 tons. (1950-1959), 11.074 tons. (1960-1969), 15.459 tons. (1970-1979), and 10.561 tons. (1980-1989). More than 80% of these exports originated in *Montes de María* (DANE, *Comerio Exterior*; Blanco Romero, 2010).

since the XIX century, Liberals and Conservatives, signed a power-sharing agreement for redemocratisation in 1957.<sup>12</sup> The resulting *Frente Nacional* regime (1958-1974) effectively blocked the rise of authoritarian rulers, accelerated economic growth, and broadened social and political rights. However, the deal faced growing criticism because it also hindered electoral competition for other political parties (Bejarano, 1983; Archila Neira, 2018).

Within the opportunities and restrictions of the *Frente Nacional*, *campesinos* in *Montes de María* collaborated intensely through the 1960s with Communist and Maoist activists, with a Catholic trade union, and with a local pro-*campesino* faction of the Liberal party (Fals Borda, 2002; Molano Camargo, 2017). Tobacco cultivators in particular mobilised more consistently thanks to these partnerships (Pérez Ortega, 2010). Moreover, the concurrence of two national policies enabled these initiatives to have a greater impact. First, within a broader process of decentralisation of public administration, the Department of Sucre (capital Sincelejo) was created in 1967.<sup>13</sup> Sucre's territory incorporated the southern half of *Montes de María*. Over 1967 and 1968, politicians and citizens in the latter area challenged the bipartisan rigidity and mobilised to create two new municipalities (González Correa, 2015).<sup>14</sup>

Second, and more critically, the national government launched an Agrarian Reform in the late 1960s aimed at land redistribution and formal organisation of agrarian producers.<sup>15</sup> The initiative soon polarised *campesinos* and landowners, though. Hundreds of *campesinos* in *Montes de María* were initially evicted off their plots (in which they mostly were tenants and sharecroppers) because large landowners felt threatened by the topic of land redistribution. Aware of landowners' influence on public administration in the microregion, *campesinos* accepted support of the national government to converge around the first local chapters of the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos* (ANUC) (Reyes Posada, 1978). These local chapters enabled *campesinos* to gradually rise as leaders, even without identifying as Liberals or Conservatives. Criticism against the slow progress of land redistribution also spread within ANUC chapters in *Montes de María* (Pérez Ortega, 2010: 23-32). On a broader scale, ANUC had already become the largest trade union in the country when it was officially inaugurated in July 1970, at the *I Congreso Campesino* in Bogota.<sup>16</sup> Challenging this development, the fourth and last

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<sup>12</sup> Redemocratisation is understood as the restoration of formal democratic institutions (e.g. majority-elected legislators) after a hiatus (Geddes, 2011: 606).

<sup>13</sup> Departments are the largest subnational administrative jurisdictions in Colombia, typically comprising several municipalities. About Sucre: *Ley 47/1966* (D.O., August 30<sup>th</sup> 1966).

<sup>14</sup> 'Paro en ciudad de Corozal', *El Tiempo*, November 28<sup>th</sup> 1968; 'Creados tres nuevos municipios', *El Tiempo*, November 29<sup>th</sup> 1968.

<sup>15</sup> The Agrarian Reform in *Ley 1/1968* (D.O., February 12<sup>th</sup> 1968) corrected and expanded the failed proposal of the first *Frente Nacional* government, *Ley 135/1961* (D.O., December 20<sup>th</sup> 1961).

<sup>16</sup> ANUC was a State-supported trade union of *usuarios* (users of State agrarian agencies). *Campesinos* joined local ANUC chapters, upon which departmental chapters and nationwide ANUC were built (*Decreto 755/1967*, D.O., May 20<sup>th</sup> 1967; *MinAgricultura* (April 1968). *Campaña nacional de organización campesina*. No. 4: 6-11). By July 1970, more than 1 million *usuarios* (there were just over 5 million workers in the country) were registered in 590 local ANUC chapters (*MinAgricultura* (July 1970). *Memoria Ministro de Agricultura*. July 1969 – July 1970: 31-32).



*Frente Nacional* government started one month later and rapidly motioned to phase out land redistribution (Zamosc, 1986).

The policy turn in 1970 incentivised many *usuarios* around the country to distance from the national government and political parties. Additionally, they started a national campaign of *recuperaciones* on February 21<sup>st</sup> 1971 to push redistribution of agricultural land. *Recuperaciones* were operations in which several *campesina* families persistently occupied idle land until gaining control over a few plots.<sup>17</sup> Leaders of the *usuarios* involved in the campaign also presented their own proposal for Agrarian Reform in response to national government plans to control ANUC (ANUC, 1971; Kalmanovitz, 1971). Some of them then organised their own *II Congreso Campesino* in Sincelejo in July 1972, where they created *ANUC Línea Sincelejo* (ANUC-LS) as a decidedly non-governmental mechanism to protect their interests. *Campesinos* in *Montes de María* featured prominently in this process. They left aside disputes among them to set up the event in Sincelejo (Pérez Ortega, 2010). Moreover, the *recuperaciones* campaign was especially successful in *Montes de María* (and in northern Colombia) because of solidarity among *campesinos*. Additionally, a strike called jointly by tobacco cultivators and factory workers paralysed roads and stores in the microregion for several days in 1973 (Reyes Posada, 1978: 152-158; Zamosc, 1986).

In the long term, *campesinos* across the country self-fashioned their political subjectivity upon their involvement in *recuperaciones* and in ANUC-LS (CNRR, 2010: 202-211; Molano Camargo, 2017).<sup>18</sup> However, divisions persisted about goals (land redistribution, broader agrarian policies, or deeper political transformations) and strategies (more or less direct action, more or less articulation with formal political institutions). Divergences at and after the *III Congreso Campesino* in 1974 suggested that the unity of ANUC-LS was unlikely (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1987: 161-166; Fals Borda, 2002: 186A-193A). In fact, many *usuarios*, especially among those who gained control over land plots, quit ANUC-LS in the coming years amid these internal disputes. The crisis continued to worsen until ANUC-LS leaders requested a reunion with State-supported ANUC in 1978. The end of ANUC-LS exacerbated ideological divisions between *campesinos* in *Montes de María*, even leading to violent confrontations (González Correa, 2015; Molano Camargo, 2017). Anyway, because most of them refused to fall back under government supervision, this also was seen as an opportunity for a reorganisation. In the end, many continued to perform *recuperaciones*, and did so through the 1980s and 1990s (Pérez Ortega, 2010; Berman-Arévalo, 2021).

Thus, peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María* carried on various struggles between the 1950s and the 1970s. As in the rest of the country, *campesinos* seldom agreed about their strategies and their objectives. In the microregion, reasons for this included diverse tensions over the expanding tobacco economy, shifts in (national and subnational) formal politics, changes in

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<sup>17</sup> *Usuarios* chose to call these operations *recuperaciones* to insist in their legitimacy, meaning that they were reclaiming rather than invading land (Machuca Pérez, 2016: 53). *Campesinos* in *Montes de María* had been occupying agricultural land since the late 1960s: 'Hace un año se previno a Sucre sobre invasión', *El Tiempo*, April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1969.

<sup>18</sup> State-supported ANUC continued to exist and both trade unions competed for *usuarios*. ANUC-LS was stronger in *Montes de María*, and more generally in northern Colombia (Pérez Ortega, 2010: 43-61).

who controlled agricultural land, and various ideological influences. Their trajectories also converged on crucial topics, though, when *campesinos* compromised. The success of *recuperaciones* in *Montes de María* in the 1970s was outstanding. Also distinctive was their challenge to the crisis of ANUC-LS so the project remained alive into the 1980s. For Rivera Cusicanqui (1987), *usuarios* who benefitted from Agrarian Reform more quickly abandoned the ANUC-LS project because there was insufficient formal space to transform political institutions. Conversely, Pérez Ortega (2010) argues that dynamics of mobilisation in *Montes de María* mainly reflected agreements and conflicts between *campesinos* there and not larger political or economic contexts. Both conclusions are supported with convincing empirical evidence. They suggest changes in social relations within *campesinos* in *Montes de María*, as well as between them and other social actors.

### ***Montes de María* in the reorganisation of ANUC-LS, 1977-1987**

This section discusses how *campesinos* in *Montes de María* negotiated the continuity of different trajectories of mobilisation through and after the crisis of ANUC-LS. Before delving into the case, it is important to realise that the effects of the crisis were not uniform for *campesinos* across Colombia. The impact was presumably more complex for those for whom ANUC-LS was an effective advocate. Moreover, two trends which consolidated since the late 1970s further differentiated obstacles. First, national policy shifted away from intervening in agrarian conflicts as the relative weight of rural population and agrarian economies decreased. However, the pace of those demographic and economic transitions differed between regions and production systems (Rojas *et al.*, 1992; Machado, 1998). Second, armed violence escalated and institutional legitimacy receded amid the expansion of criminal economies linked to illegal drugs of agrarian origin. *Campesinos* in some peripheral regions were increasingly alienated as non-State armed organisations fought for control of such economies while the State prioritised a national security optic to respond (Fajardo Montaña, 2018). Thus, the conditions and motivations for peasant mobilisation became overall more fragmented.

Considering the above, *campesinos* in *Montes de María* were in a relatively strong position at that point, albeit not for long. First, they had substantially improved their access to land and their income from tobacco exports through the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>19</sup> However, the latter slowed down moderately since the early 1980s. Second, armed revolutionaries that settled in the microregion since the late 1960s in principle facilitated the continuation of *recuperaciones* and the rejection of State control (Escobar, 2002; Berman-Arévalo, 2021). However, by the mid-1980s, relations between them and *campesinos* were quickly deteriorating because the microregion became a strategic territory for trafficking illegal drugs and weapons (CNRR, 2010; González Correa, 2015). And third, most *usuarios* in *Montes de María* had joined, before the collapse of ANUC-LS, dissident groups like *Sectores Minoritarios* (SM, Minority Factions), *Junta*

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<sup>19</sup> Tobacco cultivators' income was 34% higher than the average of agrarian workers in *Montes de María*, a premium which also helped them increase food production (ICA. Luis Agudelo V., Fernando Cardozo P. (1985). *Estudio socioeconómico distrito El Carmen de Bolívar*. Documento de trabajo 00-6-226-85: 30-33).

*Reorganizadora* (JR, Reorganisation Board) and *Sector Consecuente-Clasista* (SECCA, Class-Consequent Faction) (Pérez Ortega, 2010). Whereas *SM* were strong in a handful of microregions across the country influenced by *recuperaciones*, the other two groups were concentrated in *Montes de María*.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, *campesinos* in *Montes de María* had both interest and better chances of keeping up the momentum of their mobilisation. However, they also wanted changes. In this context, Suárez (a *SM* from the microregion without experience or visibility as a leader) proposed the reorganisation of ANUC-LS at the *IV Congreso Campesino* in February 1977. That meeting had been designed to exclude critical voices (Zamosc, 1986; Fals Borda, 2002). While this proposal initially had little support, in 1979 it was reinvigorated with the incorporation of the *Concejo de Unidad Campesina* (CUC, *Campesina* Unity Council). The leaders of CUC were Rivera and Pérez Ortega, former members of tobacco cultivators' unions in (and near) *Montes de María* and then influential figures in the national leadership of ANUC-LS. By the time they quit the reunion with State-supported ANUC to join the reorganisation with CUC, they were mostly supported by *campesinos* outside *Montes de María*.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, the reorganisation of ANUC-LS brought together distinct trajectories of peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María*. Although their histories and expectations differed, they deemed agreements possible. An extensive record of rivalries and collaborations between Rivera (CUC) and Suárez (*SM*) indeed illustrates this. Since the 1960s, as members of tobacco cultivators' unions, both leaders participated in *recuperaciones* and collaborated in the earliest local ANUC chapters.<sup>22</sup> Rivera became president of ANUC Sucre in 1970 and gained a divisive notoriety for publicly announcing the *recuperaciones* campaign in February 1971. Months later, overseeing the election of his successor in ANUC Sucre, Rivera faced emerging divisions between *usuarios* in *Montes de María*. In his view, these were mainly caused by opportunistic leaders.<sup>23</sup> From another perspective, Suárez was among many *usuarios* who opposed the election of Pérez Ortega, which Rivera supported. For Suárez, 1971 was the start of a pattern in which leaders of ANUC-LS overlooked ideological and tactical divergences.<sup>24</sup> However, he also insisted that the experience of Rivera and company was potentially decisive for the reorganisation.<sup>25</sup>

Although Rivera and Suárez had built up animosities over a long decade, they made significant concessions to overcome them during two meetings in Sincelejo, in February 1980 and April 1981. In fact, their statements during those meetings reveal their concurrence about two critical questions for reorienting peasant mobilisation. On the one hand, *usuarios* ultimately wanted leaders to be more accountable. Their persistent but unarticulated mobilisation in

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<sup>20</sup> BDLC, 01-002; 01-003; 01-073; 01-104.

<sup>21</sup> BDLC, 01-073, 4-5; Pérez Ortega, 2010 (the leader of CUC); Rampf et al., 2014; Molano Camargo, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> BDLC, 01-144, 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> BDLC, 01-037, 1-5.

<sup>24</sup> Supporting Suárez, Zamosc (1986: 179-182) and Fals Borda (2002: 187A-193A) indicate that ANUC-LS collapsed to a large extent because of the authoritarian managerial style of the national leadership, and the lack of a political project which coherently grasped *usuarios*' heterogeneity. These problems were evident in the *Congresos* of ANUC-LS in 1974 and 1977.

<sup>25</sup> BDLC, 01-052; 01-145, 5-7.

Montes de María, for instance, suggests that leaders were not genuinely representing them.<sup>26</sup> In part because of this, all *usuarios* were allowed to join the discussions in the first meeting (February 1980). In reality, this was also an explicit criticism to the selective debates within ANUC-LS. Suárez remarked the relevance of this decision during and after that meeting.<sup>27</sup> Leaders of *CUC* also acknowledged the improvement. Pérez Ortega (2010) admits that letting all *usuarios* speak produced a better insight of differences, even though discussions prolonged and conclusions remained thin with that format.

On the other hand, relations between ANUC-LS and other social and political actors caused tensions because *usuarios* were unevenly interested in negotiating their priorities. These differences often reflected their anxiety (often based on past experiences) about being subordinated, even by apparently sympathetic partners. Indeed, ANUC-LS finally crashed because of the creation of a political party at the *IV Congreso Campesino*. Many dissident *usuarios* rejected formal politics (which they considered a setback for their mobilisation) and most criticised how ANUC-LS conducted the debate. The former of these prejudices was particularly widespread in *Montes de María*.<sup>28</sup> For instance, even after the first meeting in 1980, Suárez argued for a radical autonomy in which *usuarios* solved problems “with their own means” rather than “imploring” anything from the State.<sup>29</sup> However, by April 1981 he acknowledged that such radical autonomy was unlikely while *campesinos* were followers and not “thinkers and agents”.<sup>30</sup> He eventually admitted to the relevance of partisan projects and, later that year, even to the possibility of taking advantage of State policies.<sup>31</sup>

These two questions were at the core of the agreement drafted after the second meeting in April 1981. In relation to the first, *campesinos* incorporated “internal democracy” as a core guideline for the reorganisation. And regarding the other, the agreement also defined (the new) ANUC-LS as “a broad-based trade union [...] independent of the State and political parties”, and engaged in “revolutionary struggle”.<sup>32</sup> These solutions both addressed key questions and created new challenges for the continuity of ANUC-LS. As Suárez said himself, a debate open to all *usuarios* facilitated collaboration upon “affinities”, but it also mandated space for different opinions.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the provisions of political independence and revolutionary goals mostly meant that *usuarios* were allowed to pursue multiple mobilisation strategies. *Campesinos’* insistence on these warrants delayed the *V Congreso Campesino* for reunification. In the end, a new start was agreed in August 1987 under the banner *ANUC Unidad y Reconstrucción* (ANUC-UR). It was arguably too late, though, as peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María* would not be

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<sup>26</sup> Both Suárez and Rivera criticised non-constructive leaderships within ANUC-LS, although pointing at different culprits: for Rivera the main problem was the “leftist radicalism” of dissidents, while Suárez rejected approaches with State agencies or political parties: *BDLC*, 01-051; 01-052.

<sup>27</sup> *BDLC*, 01-051, 2; 01-073, 7-10.

<sup>28</sup> *BDLC*, 01-001; 01-003; 01-104; Escobar, 2002; Rampf et al., 2014.

<sup>29</sup> *BDLC*, 01-051, 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> *BDLC*, 01-092, 1-3.

<sup>31</sup> *BDLC*, 01-145, 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> *BDLC*, 01-076, 10-12; Pérez Ortega, 2010: 150-154.

<sup>33</sup> *BDLC*, 01-092, 17-18.

widely articulated again until a different context prevailed in the late 1990s (Pérez Ortega, 2010; Machuca Pérez, 2016).

### **Reducing political inequalities in Montes de María, 1950-2000**

This final section wraps up the case study of peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María* in dialogue with the question of democratisation. The rise, collapse and reorganisation of ANUC-LS in the microregion were the making of heterogeneous trajectories alternating conflict and cooperation over the years. While some *campesinos* resorted to violence during the crisis of ANUC-LS, others patiently negotiated their reorganisation into ANUC-UR for six years. Considering that, this section highlights the central finding of this article: mobilisation created conditions for *campesinos* to negotiate the reduction of political inequalities. The two questions of the Suárez-Rivera debate, presented in the former section, illustrate this finding. Where the question of internal democracy refers to inequalities among *campesinos* (particularly between leaders and the rest), that of political independence mirrored *campesinos*' dissatisfaction with their lower status within formal political institutions. Now, as *campesinos*' priorities shifted to availing of State-level political reforms (since the late 1980s) and staying safe from violence (since the mid-1990s), the reorganisation lost appeal. The changes in social relations examined here gained relevance in the coming decades, though.

Despite the failure of the reorganisation, the process provided a stage for *campesinos* in *Montes de María* to express the need for reduced political inequalities. To be clear, mobilisation did not convert *campesinos* to what Escobar (2002) calls “democratic citizenship”, but two tensions at the level of social relations were exposed during the meetings.<sup>34</sup> The agreement about broad participation and internal democracy anticipated that in the longer term *campesinos* in the microregion would more confidently question the authority of leaders. For instance, some ANUC-UR *usuarios* overtly claimed in the mid-1990s their right to compromise with clientelist partisan networks rather than with *usuarios*-based coalitions during elections (Escobar, 2002: 37-38). In fact, their attitude mainly reflects dissatisfaction with their leaders. *Usuarios* from this group participated in the reorganisation and formed a revolutionary army in the 1980s. They demobilised in the early 1990s and created collective agrarian projects to resume civilian life in the microregion. At the latter point, they also dissociated from former leaders who showed more interest in national partisan projects than in local agrarian enterprises (Rampf *et al.*, 2014). Thus, this change can also be interpreted from the point of view of leaders, who were expected to stand behind (rather than above) the *campesinos* they represented.

Meanwhile, combining ambivalent relations with formal politics and revolutionary objectives produced more complex outcomes. As mentioned, some *usuarios* in *Montes de María*

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<sup>34</sup> Escobar's (2002) notion of democratic citizenship means social relations in which all individuals are effectively represented before a regime and participants in civil society, both of which ensure equal rights. The concept can certainly be fit within the expanded concept of democratisation proposed by O'Donnell (1993), Avritzer (2001), and Valdivia Rivera (2019).

joined armed revolutionaries and some engaged in partisan politics.<sup>35</sup> Both created tensions which motivated *campesinos* to deepen ties within a diverse civil society that had emerged in the microregion since the 1980s. Some of the earlier civil society initiatives covered for shortfalls of ANUC-LS but failed to deliver greater transformations (Fals Borda, 2002; Machuca Pérez, 2016). For instance, the tobacco economy in *Montes de María* collapsed in the 1990s even though cultivators created associations to improve the sector since the previous decade.<sup>36</sup> Considering that limited economic opportunities had previously been the key obstacle to more democratic social relations, the overall effect was a setback (Escobar, 2002). Another part of civil society got entangled with clientelist partisan networks which emerged after the 1980s reforms to decentralise public administration (Escobar, 2002). These ultimately accelerated *campesinos'* incorporation in formal political institutions. In fact, all four groups at the reorganisation tried partisan politics after the new 1991 Constitution expanded political rights (Pérez Ortega, 2010).<sup>37</sup> Partisan projects grouping *usuarios* in *Montes de María* had some successes but most failed to compete against renewed clientelist networks in the longer term (Escobar, 2002; Rampf *et al.*, 2014; Molano Camargo, 2017).

Finally, since the mid-1980s *usuarios* in *Montes de María* were isolated from other social actors because some of them formed or supported revolutionary armies. Most of these armies demobilised between 1991 and 1994 to take advantage of political reforms, but violence intensified in *Montes de María* as other revolutionaries simultaneously moved in from other regions.<sup>38</sup> Even worse, former *usuarios* were heavily targeted by counter-revolutionary armies backed by landowners since the mid-1990s. Within years, the demise of ANUC-LS had rolled further back to losses of *recuperaciones* in the microregion (Pérez Ortega, 2010: 166-172; Machuca Pérez, 2016). Back to where this article started, the burden of violence prompted *campesinos* to rebuild their civil society. New initiatives proliferated in the late 1990s to demand justice for *campesinos* affected by violence. Their claims were echoed first by human rights activists and then by transitional justice mechanisms (CNRR, 2010; Porras Mendoza, 2014; Ruiz, 2014). Their

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<sup>35</sup> Rivera and Suárez reproached the increasing participation of *campesinos* in *Montes de María* in armed struggle: *BDLC*, 01-073, 9; 01-091, 11; 01-092, 1-3. However, in the early 1980s both leaders were accused by state entities of collaborating with armed revolutionaries, and Rivera even left the country in 1983 (Machuca Pérez, 2016: 75, 121).

<sup>36</sup> Colombian tobacco exports decreased between 30% and 50% in the 1990s (DANE. *Comercio Exterior*). In *Montes de María*, the harvest dropped about 25% and cultivated area almost halved over the decade (UNDP *et al.*, 2003: section 3.1.3.2). Meanwhile, cultivators in the microregion moved from local to national objectives and obtained partial palliatives, like support to join a special retirement fund and to switch to other crops ('Seguridad social para trabajadores del tabaco', *El Tiempo*, January 11<sup>th</sup> 1992; 'Nace Fedetabaco', *El Tiempo*, July 9<sup>th</sup> 1994; 'Ovejas se queda sin el tabaco', *El Tiempo*, September 10<sup>th</sup> 1994; 'MinAgricultura ayuda al tabaco', *El Tiempo*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 1998).

<sup>37</sup> *Campesinos* in ANUC-UR initially considered the political reforms and the Constitutional process a "distraction" from their struggles, in contrast to most other *campesinos* in the country (Rojas *et al.*, 1992: 51-60).

<sup>38</sup> Demobilised revolutionaries included the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* (PRT) in 1991, and both the *Corriente de Renovación Socialista* and the *Frente Francisco Garnica* in 1994 ('El PRT quemó sus últimos cartuchos', *El Tiempo*, January 26<sup>th</sup> 1991; 'Se desmovilizó el Francisco Garnica', *El Tiempo*, June 27<sup>th</sup> 1994; Rampf *et al.*, 2014; González Correa, 2015: 178-191).

recognition materialised in the potent narrative of a broader fight for democratisation. In a last thrust to reduce political inequalities, in the 2010s *campesinos* demanded that these opportunities were also open to less known histories of mobilisation and violence in the microregion (Abitbol, 2018).

## Conclusion (and invitation to a further discussion)

A historical review of peasant mobilisation in *Montes de María* shows the potential of agrarian histories to inform specific mechanisms through which democratisation unfolded in Latin America during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The review critically examines case-specific findings and engages with a theoretical discussion about democratisation as the reduction of political inequalities. This concept enables agrarian historians to explain democratisation by appraising whether and how peasant mobilisation altered concrete social relations (Huber, 1995; Moyo, 2001). In *Montes de María*, cooperation and conflict between multiple trajectories of peasant mobilisation created a stage for *campesinos* to negotiate what they struggled for and how they did it (Escobar, 2002; Pérez Ortega, 2010; Rampf *et al.*, 2014; Molano Camargo, 2017). In this respect, and looking closely at their reorganisation in the early 1980s, the article emphasises the shift towards more egalitarian decision making, and the tolerance of different mobilisation strategies. These agreements in fact express *campesinos'* understanding of the need to reduce political inequalities, both among them and between them and other social actors. Moreover, both agreements created precedents for changes that eventually occurred through messy processes in the next decades. Two key changes towards horizontal social relations consolidated among *campesinos* in the microregion since the 1980s: the expectation that leaders are accountable, and the conviction that diverse strategies are valid to contest formal political institutions. These clearly are steps in the direction of democratisation as defined in this article.

The significance of these outcomes becomes clearer when they are situated in dialogue with both broader processes and parallel cases. To start with, redemocratisation of formal political institutions in Colombia was a fairly stable but slow process. As access to formal institutions was facilitated in the 1990s, though, intensified violence in *Montes de María* blocked *campesinos* off. Simultaneously, the expansive cycle of the tobacco economy in the microregion came to an abrupt end. Violence and diminished economic options may have prevented *campesinos* in *Montes de María* (especially leaders) from availing of institutional reforms to further tackle political inequalities. However, as a result of their persistent mobilisation for over half a century, *campesinos* became more knowledgeable about formal politics, understood better their own needs, and built stronger connections among them and with other social actors. In fact, these resources built up by *campesinos* in *Montes de María* only became evident (again) in the late 1990s, when they focused on demanding justice for victims of violence. At this latter point, safety and justice were more urgent for them than partisanship or economic chances. Reunited around this goal, *campesinos* recovered civil society mechanisms which allowed them to reduce political inequalities between them and other social actors. Thus, mobilised *campesinos*

in *Montes de María* drove political change over half a century, not so much with a coherent exercise to transform institutions but through negotiating their heterogeneous aspirations.

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