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The Role of the Ejido in Mexican Land Reform

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Prefatory Note

THE Mexican land reform, with its roots in the Revolution of 1910, set a precedent in Latin America. Since the ejido system was established, students have periodically studied the situation in Mexico to find out what it has accomplished and how it might be improved, as well as what might be learned from it to apply to other Latin American nations. And the more academic question, where did this unique system originate, has always been an interesting subject for scholarly discussion.

Nathan L. Whetten began research for his book, *Rural Mexico* (University of Chicago) in the early forties, some years after Cárdenas had given the reform movement new impetus. Whetten's book has remained a classic since it was published in 1948.

When the University of Wisconsin Land Tenure Center faculty seminar discussed possible research in Mexico, Whetten, now Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Connecticut, was a natural person to turn to for guidance. His remarks at the February, 1963, meeting of the faculty seminar pointed up possible research questions. Since they summarize the Mexican situation, the Land Tenure Center decided to present them in this discussion paper.

LAND TENURE CENTER
212 Agricultural Hall
University of Wisconsin
Madison 6, Wisconsin

The Role of the Ejido in Mexican Land Reform

Nathan L. Whetten^o

THE Mexican patterns of land tenure have always been very different from those in the United States. From the very beginning, our country has emphasized the family farm, which in Mexico has been conspicuous by its absence. One may well ask why the two patterns have been so different, and for an answer we must turn to history. In the United States, the settlers came in search of freedom and, with some exceptions, were eager to till the land themselves. They found this land inhabited only by scattered Indian tribes, who were not numerous enough to interfere seriously with the settlers' plans and who could be displaced gradually as colonization schemes grew. After the settlers pushed through New England—where I assure you the soil is not very hospitable to agriculture—they came to the Mid-West where, as you know, they found virgin fertile land to till, ample water and vast level areas of land beautifully suited to farming. They were encouraged by the Homestead Act and further helped by the United States Department of Agriculture which established agricultural experiment stations and extension services. All of these conditions made it natural and easy to establish a pattern of independent family farms.

Land Policies in Early Mexico

The Spaniards who came to Mexico in 1516 encountered a much more complex situation than that faced by newcomers in this country. They found the land already thickly settled, especially in the more desirable parts of the *mesa central*, and they could not push the indigenous people back to reservations as we did. They proceeded to subjugate the natives and to impose Christianity and a Spanish civilization upon them. The *conquistadores* were certainly not farmers at heart; moreover, they acquired a land none too inviting for agriculture. They could not just spread out to large tracts and start plowing for crops, for much of Mexico is mountainous, arid, and hostile to the development of transportation systems.

In trying to superimpose their Spanish civilization on top of the indigenous base, the Spaniards developed what they called the "*encomienda system*"—whole villages and their lands were allotted in trust to worthy conquistadors. The Indians were required to do manual labor for the *encomenderos*, who were entitled to collect tribute for the king and receive work from the inhabitants. In the resulting class structure of conquerors and conquered, there certainly was no place for the family farm to develop. The Indians had lived traditionally in what we call a land-holding village arrangement—land was a public value belonging to the community, and there was no private ownership. Hence, since the natives had no conception of individual property in land, it proved easy for the Spaniards simply to place themselves in authority over the communities as directors or supervisors and to alter land relationships as they wished. Gradually most Indian lands were incorporated into the *encomiendas*, which later developed into the *haciendas*.

The king and others in Spain tried to put some restrictions on the *encomiendas* to keep them from being too exploitative. But Spain was far away, and the regulations issued in favor of the natives were virtually ignored by the *encomenderos*, who had persuaded themselves that they owned not only the land but also the people who worked it. In 1720 the *encomienda* itself was abolished, but by that time much of the land—except for some of the Indian villages which still functioned as in pre-Conquest days—had been taken over into the *hacienda* system where the same attitudes prevailed.

The Era of Reform

During the era of the *Reforma* (in the 1850's), President Benito Juárez, who was an Indian himself, attempted to restore land to the Indians. He thought that the way to do this was to issue Indians titles to their land; but this step backfired into results quite opposite to those that Juárez had sought. Since the Indians did not appreciate the meaning of a title and could be bargained out of their papers very easily,

^oDean of the Graduate School
University of Connecticut

the measure made it all the more simple for landlords to extend even further their monopoly over the lands. It seemed that every effort to help the Indians turned out to their detriment. By 1910, the ownership of land had become so concentrated in a few hands that an estimated 90 per cent of the rural population had no land whatsoever which they could call their own.

When the revolution of 1910 broke out, it was a political stroke to overthrow the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and secure rotation in the presidency. Before long, however, the slogan *tierra y libertad*—land and liberty—was adopted, and the idea that the land belongs to him who works it dominated the whole revolutionary movement. Mexico's historical landmark in tackling land tenure problems came in 1915 when President Venustiano Carranza issued a decree, which was later incorporated into the Constitution of 1917 as Article 27. The philosophy behind this article has been basic in Mexico's whole agrarian development. It states that the nation is the original and sole owner of water, mineral deposits, and subsoil; these are inalienable and inprescriptible. Private parties may be granted rights of exploitation only under specified conditions. In transmitting the surface of the land as private property to individuals, the nation reserves the right to impose limitations in the interests of the public welfare.

These, as you see, are exceedingly revolutionary pronouncements, and they were made at a time when the Russian Revolution was barely getting started. Although the Russians have claimed the initiative, their Revolution could have actually borrowed concepts that had already been formulated and put into practice in Mexico.

The Constitution of 1917 declared that the nation's right to expropriate private property is limited and may be exercised only in the interest of the public welfare and after compensation. It contained formulae for the solution of agrarian problems and specified procedures for redistributing lands to the Indian communities. Certain lands were exempted from expropriation. Although the land to be assigned to the petitioning Indian villages was to be taken from the nearby large estates, the *hacendado* was permitted to keep a certain amount of land—about 100 hectares of irrigated land or 200 hectares of seasonal land—and he was permitted to choose which tracts he would keep. For that reason, there was often a difference in the quality of land that was retained privately and that which went into the *ejido*, which I will describe in a moment, since naturally the landowners would choose the better land to keep for themselves in any land expropriation program.

The amount of compensation to be paid to persons whose land was being expropriated was fixed at its assessed value, for tax purposes, as declared in the latest official records, plus 10 per cent. This, of course, was far below market value, and the matter became a subject for continued protest on the part of the landowners. Furthermore, the compensation tendered was in the form of agrarian bonds which many landowners feared might ultimately become worthless.

Land was expropriated and distributed very gradually at first, but later it was speeded up so fast that a great many people thought that the program would end in disaster. When I was in Mexico during the late 1930's, right after Lázaro Cárdenas had become President, and the greatest amount of land redistribution was taking place, I used to ask frequently, "Why do you do this at such breakneck speed and in such wholesale fashion? Why don't you take time to plan the communities before distributing the land? Why don't you choose the recipients of the land more carefully?" Almost invariably I got the answer, "It would be better to go slow. No doubt about that; that's how it should be done. But throughout our history, every time land reform has been attempted, it has been resisted and blocked. If we try to move slowly now, all the hostile interests will congeal in a solid front, and no land reform will ever take place."

The Development of the *Ejido*

As a medium to handle the redistribution of land, the Mexicans set up what they called the *ejido* system, a land-holding village type of settlement pattern. This pattern was, in a sense, a reversion to pre-Conquest days, for it tried to use and modify some of the elements that had existed in the early Indian villages and communities. The outstanding feature of the *ejido* system is that the property rights in land are vested in the community—the *ejido*—as a group and not in the individual user. A farmer would be given the use of the land for his lifetime, and he could pass it on to an heir, but he could not sell it nor could he rent it, but had to work it himself. If land lay idle for two years in succession, it could be taken away and returned to the community for assignment to someone else. The purpose of this feature was undoubtedly to try to make sure that once the land was distributed, it would not easily gravitate back to the large *latifundios*.

It was decided early to make the unit of land allotment four hectares of irrigated land or eight hectares of seasonal land (land which netted enough seasonal rainfall to produce a crop), plus a share in pasture and woodlands, which were to be held for common use by the whole group. The tillable land could be operated either on an individual basis or in a cooperative farming enterprise. Even four hectares is a small piece, but, alas, there were so many people craving land and the dealing out took place with such speed and enthusiasm, and with so many political factors entering into the picture, that many more people were awarded land than there was land to apportion. So it did not turn out to be four hectares at all in many cases; three hectares, two hectares—even less—became a family's share of the total *ejido* grant that had to be fractioned up among so many claimants. It was a great weakness in the program that not only was the proposed land unit too scant, in the first place, but the pieces actually distributed were often far smaller than the promises. There have been efforts to remedy this defect, and the base unit is now—in theory at least—ten hectares of irrigated land or twenty hectares of seasonal land, plus pastures, woodlands, and so forth.

In regions where the land was very productive and susceptible to operation with machinery, there were efforts to organize collective ejidos in order to strengthen the economy of the farming units; and in the Laguna region, the Yaqui valley, and a few other areas, the collective ejido became the predominant type. I shall return soon to a more detailed description of the collectives.

A democratic framework was set up for running the affairs of the ejido. All residents in the ejido were members of a general assembly which elected its *comisariado ejidal*—or executive committee, we might say—composed of a chairman and two other directors. These officials managed the ejido's affairs, but were subject always to the questions and policy decisions of the general assembly. There was also a vigilance committee, consisting of three elected members, to check on the procedures of the executive group. Evidently no one wanted the *comisariado* men to turn into landlords or dictators.

A source of credit for the ejidos was established in the *Banco Ejidal*, which had headquarters in Mexico City and regional branches all over the country. Credit societies were organized, and the Banco Ejidal carried on what might be called an extension service. In other words, since it was to the bank's interest to insure some reasonable chance of getting back a loan, it took on a certain amount of supervision of the farmers' operations. In recent years the Ministry of Agriculture has organized a rather elaborate agricultural extension program to assist both private and ejido farmers.

On those ejidos which were composed of individual farm units, each man had a particular plot which he farmed alone and from which he took the proceeds. Of course, in order to get credit from the Banco Ejidal, he had to acquiesce in an approved plan of operations so that in a sense some supervision occurred even in the ejidos where the plots were operated independently.

The Cooperative Ejido—An Evaluation

The cooperative ejido was a genuine innovation, for, I remind you, collective farming in Mexico preceded the collective farms of Soviet Russia. On the collective farms no one had claim to a particular parcel of land but each took his share from the total farm enterprise, which was characterized by more intricate planning, teamwork, and division of labor.

The collective farm enjoys a great number of advantages over the individual farm, particularly on the theoretical level. It can afford adequate machinery unattainable on the small unit. It utilizes varied vocational skills, providing a role for mechanics, managers, carpenters, tractor operators, and so on, instead of requiring every man to do every phase of the job on his own small plot. Rotation and specialization of crops is more feasible. Supplementary enterprises can be developed which provide slack-season employment and fuller use of labor resources. Under

collective planning, more uniform and better quality products can be obtained with resulting advantages in the market. Products can be withheld from the market for a time, thus giving higher bargaining power on prices. More effective supervision can be provided since workers can be handled in groups. The collective's wider base of earnings can take care of widows and disabled persons in the community, and various other social services can be provided more easily by tapping gross profits of the enterprise instead of relying on individual contributions. Finally, the collective system tends to preserve the unity and economic efficiency of the haciendas instead of fragmenting them into small unrelated pieces.

All of this seems to add up highly in favor of the collective ejido. But some of these points are valid only if you have suitable land on which machinery can be used. Much of Mexico's farmland is on hillside patches that do not lend themselves to large-scale, mechanized agriculture. Furthermore, the Mexican collectives have run into some difficulties that are bound to arise from human frailties. The collectives pose the problem of adequate leadership; it is not easy to find a farmer competent to supervise a large cooperative farm. Managers were ordinarily chosen from among the *ejidatarios* themselves—selected by vote of the general assembly. But this method puts undue strains on democracy, for the most popular fellow in the ejido is not necessarily the best qualified to run a large-scale enterprise. Even under a capable manager, there were dissatisfactions over concentration of power and resentments of the tasks that were assigned.

A great many of the workers began to feel that even though the collective may be more efficient, there is nothing like having a piece of land to call your own and handle as you please. Many workers complained that they had thought they were getting land and what they really got after all was a job under a boss—about the same situation as before. Almost invariably there has been clamor to break the collectives up into individual holdings or at least to modify their methods. There have also been acute problems of discipline among the workers. Hence, the collective ejidos became a fertile field for labor organizers or people who wanted to stir up dissatisfactions with the existing regimes. Indeed, the cooperatives have had a difficult struggle, and quite a few of them have been either modified greatly or broken up entirely.

The collective ejidos have always been only a small proportion compared to the vast number of ejidos that are individually operated, but some quite spectacular profits have been made on those cooperatives which use modern agricultural methods and machinery. In 1944, I visited a collective ejido in the Tapachula area at the time when the crop had been harvested and they were distributing the profits to barefoot men who obviously had worked in the past under very primitive conditions. Working on this ejido, not only had they received an anticipatory wage during the growing season, but now each man was getting his share in the harvest profits in terms

of the number of days he had worked. I saw the list on which every ejidatario had acknowledged his payments; there were very few written signatures since most of them had to sign by means of thumbprints because they did not know how to write. I would like to go back to that same ejido sometime to see what changes have come about. I know they must be tremendous because the literacy rate in Mexico has risen greatly in the past few years.

A New Look at the Ejido

The ejido system has served a very valuable purpose, but it is now time to take a new look at it. It is time to ask, "How well is the ejido system designed to meet the needs of Mexico's changing society? Does the system need revisions in order to function more efficiently in terms of Mexico's present-day economy?" Before we touch further on these questions—whose final answers will call for considerable research—I would like to summarize the very real aids to Mexico's development which the ejido system has contributed.

The ejido provided a weapon against the monopolistic hacienda system which had for so many years abused Mexico's resources and exploited the lives of her people. It was an effective weapon because the peons and the workers could understand the meaning of the ejido and find in it a common ideal and hope for the future.

The political structure of the ejido—its assembly, committees, and elections—has provided training in democracy on the village level.

The loss of the large hacienda holdings has forced private landholders to farm their remaining lands much more efficiently in order to make a living, thus helping to increase agricultural production at a faster rate than the increase in population.

In my opinion, the ejido system has been instrumental in preventing international communism from becoming as strong in Mexico as it otherwise might have been, for it has given the masses satisfying objectives to work toward on the local scene and has probably reduced their susceptibility to communism.

However, the ejido system was framed with the socio-economic conditions of 1910 in mind and was designed to meet the needs of a static rather than a dynamic society. Mexico in 1910 was a nation of farmers and agricultural workers living out their lives in small farm villages and having very little communication with the outside world. More than 70 per cent of the people could neither read nor write. The death rate was so high that the population remained stationary in spite of a very high birth rate. In recent years, these conditions have changed greatly. There has been tremendous growth in non-agricultural enterprises, and the opportunities for industrial jobs have led to rapid urbanization. For example, the combined populations of the state capital cities in Mexico increased 123 per cent from 1940 to 1960. The total population rise has been 78 per cent in this same period. Thus, the large cities have grown much faster than the general population.

Consequently, Mexico is now facing a situation in which mobility should doubtless be encouraged, rather than discouraged as it is through the prohibition in the selling or renting of ejido lands. This prohibition definitely serves as an obstacle to population mobility which is so essential to an industrializing society. We saw how the regulation against renting and selling was a safeguard at first to prevent lands from gravitating back into the hands of a few. But now it is a drawback because it virtually binds the farmer to the soil since he cannot move off without penalty. Many of these people are marginal farmers who would prefer to work in industry and without whom the ejidos would be in a stronger position. Therefore, some change should be made in the regulations that would enable one to migrate without having to throw away the value of his land and its improvements. Land sale to large private owners might still be prohibited; but land sale to the ejidos allowed. If the ejidos acquired the released lands, they could use them to enlarge those existing plots that are now far too small. There is still a long way to go before the average holding reaches ten hectares, or even four.

Another point in ejido policy that may need changing concerns selectivity among those to whom land will be given. It is understandable why, in the early years when practically all the Mexicans had to live by agriculture, there could be little or no discrimination in granting lands based on a man's qualifications as a farmer. But perhaps the time has now come to set up more rigid criteria and select as future recipients of land only those individuals who show good probabilities of becoming good farmers. Employment for the others should be sought in the growing industries of the nation.

Research Questions

There are a few other questions one might ask. Is there any way to keep political factors out of the local ejido administrations and ensure that the ejido officials do not become local *caciques*; or become tools that can be manipulated by special interests? How can the efficient collective ejidos cope with the almost continuous agitation aimed at breaking them up into individually operated *parcelas* (parcels)? To what extent is prosperity on the well-run ejidos reflected in better homes, improved health practices, higher levels of education or culture? On some ejidos where I have been, the day for distributing the year's profits is also the day when dozens of high-pressure salesmen from all over creation, including the U.S.A., converge upon the ejido and quickly suck up the earnings that have been gained through the long year's efforts. How can one help the ejidatario gain more responsible judgment in spending his money and putting it toward a better living in terms of education, health, housing, and family life?

What are the patterns of migration away from the ejidos? How much takes place and what age groups are involved? What is the incidence of abandoned *parcelas* and what is done with them? One hears reports that many of the regulations are violated; for example, if people want to leave, they manage to rent

their land parcels to the ejido officials who farm them for themselves. I do not suggest that this abuse and others that one hears about are widespread, but at least there should be a study of the extent to which restrictions on the ejido are actually enforced or disregarded through connivance with the comisariados. How serious is the problem of underemployment on the ejidos? To what extent is employment off the ejido available on a seasonal basis?

In raising these questions, I don't wish to appear unduly critical. I do believe the ejido program has played an important role in the success of Mexico's social revolution, but I also believe that it needs to be thoroughly studied with a view of making it more responsive to the needs of a society that is going through such rapid changes as Mexico is experiencing at the present time. I understand that President Lopez Mateos has set up a few ejidos as demonstration and experimental projects. It may be that these will help point the way for future development.