

## The Land Problem in Mexico

By JOSEPH M. SINNOTT

**T**HE history of Mexico is a history of a struggle for the soil of the country.

Mayas, Zapotecs, Toltecs, Anahuacs, in slow succession rose to power and affluence, became luxurious and corrupt, and disappeared before the onslaughts of fresher, more vigorous tribes who fought to possess the land.

No matter how they may have differed as to tribal and religious customs, all these ancient Mexicans had common ideas regarding the soil. Land was not held as private property. Its ownership was vested in the tribe. Each family, however, was allotted a piece of land which it cultivated independently. Certain lands were reserved for the expenses of the government and the support of the priests. These lands were cultivated by the common people.

In the fifteenth century, in the territories controlled by the Aztecs, the last of the Anahuacs, the powers of the nobles were increasing and some of them had acquired lordship over lands which had belonged to conquered tribes and had reduced their inhabitants to serfdom. A feudal form of society was thus in process of development.

It was against this sort of social structure that Cortez hurled his gold-thirsty adventurers. Aided by other dissident tribes he soon conquered the effete and luxurious Montezuma, Emperor of the Aztecs, and hushed the country into peace by the power of his sword.

Along with his awe-inspiring equipment Cortez also brought the feudal ideas of his homeland. The conquered lands, belonging nominally to the Spanish Crown, were divided in most part amongst his officers. Later, when the cross followed the sword, lands were also granted by the crown for the benefit of the Church. All these lands were cultivated by the original inhabitants who became mere serfs.

For himself, Cortez obtained the Marquesado del Valle which measured 25,000 square miles, contained 22 towns and counted a population of 100,000 souls. Mines, woods, waters, the entire civil and criminal jurisdiction, and the right to the labor of the inhabitants were included in this entailed estate which, being inalienable, passed to the direct descendants. One lieutenant got 10,000 square miles with its rich silver mines. Another received Xilotepec which included 130,000 vassals. Others received grants in proportion to their supposed merits.

On all of these great entailed estates the natives were ground with a remorseless fury. At first the Church protested against the barbarous cruelties inflicted upon the hapless people but soon, it too, was involved in the process of wringing wealth from the serfs and the soil. The Spanish Crown, despite its many shortcomings, did its futile best to curb the ferocious power of the landlords.

The poor natives whipped by man and scourged by famine had but a choice of suicide or flight to enable them to escape their harsh taskmasters. Thousands chose both these avenues of release from a life of unremitting misery.

It was to lure the Indian back from his retreat in the jungles and mountain fastnesses that the ejido was conceived. The ejidos were plots of ground that were allotted to the native. They were supposed to be inalienable and from them, in his spare time, he was expected to raise his own sustenance, the King's tribute, and contributions to the clergy.

No sooner were the ejidos granted than the great landlords by dint of force, bribery and deception began gradually to enclose them. Thus began the struggle between great landlord and poor peasant which has survived to this day and which has caused one bloody revolt after another.

The revolutions of Mexico have been essentially agrarian in character—a struggle between the landed and the landless.

It was the disinherited and ragged outcasts who flocked to the standards of Hidalgo and Morelos in 1810. For that it was a burning agrarian struggle. And that was chiefly the reason why it was defeated. The land holding interests combined and were too powerful to be thrown off.

In 1823 the Mexican Congress abolished the further encroachment of estates, but too late to repair the damage. The Cortez heritage, for example, had grown to include one city, 157 towns, 89 great estates, 119 farms and 5 ranches with a total population of nearly 200,000 souls.

Meanwhile the Church also had entered the picture on a grand scale and by mortmain controlled "not less than one-half the real estate of the country." That was the estimate of Lucas Alaman, the clerical leader. It held mortgages on most of the remaining agricultural properties and had become the national money lender. Owing to special clerical privileges and exemptions, independent agriculture suffered a constant handicap and the Church was able to undersell other growers, thereby lowering market values. The Church, of course, paid no salaries, rents, interest, excises or taxes of any kind.

It has been estimated that the Texan revolt and the subsequent war with the United States in 1845, cost the people of Mexico one-half of their land. President Grant, a participant in the war, later characterized it "as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation."

In 1856 the feeble Comonfort government ordered the sale of clerically owned estates to the lessees at a price based on a rental value of six per cent, or, should the renter desire to buy, the property could be condemned and sold at the highest bidder. This effort was no stronger than the government that sponsored it and was soon discarded.

Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlotta were shocked by the conditions they found. They decreed in vain that the peasant was responsible only for his own debts and not the

those of his father. In vain did they seek to shorten his hours of toil. In vain was corporal punishment forbidden.

The Great Reform Laws of Juarez in 1867 also attempted to restore the lands to the people but were checkmated at every turn by the combined weight of landlords and clergy. Nevertheless constant effort was exerted to relieve the condition of the disinherited.

In the late eighties and nineties, under the aegis of Porfirio Diaz, the pendulum swung the other way. The peon reached his nadir. This was the era of railroad construction and influx of foreign capital. As a consequence, tilled and untilled lands acquired new values. A great wave of speculation swept over the country. The foreigner was quick to scent the exploitive possibilities of the situation and the condition of the people became more and more intolerable. They partially threw off the yoke in 1911 and then followed the revolutionary movement, aimed at land reform, which has continued to this day.

A succession of leaders promised, deceived—and were overthrown or assassinated. Then a champion, Emiliano Zapata, purest and fairest of all, glowed like a bright star against this sombre background. His slogan was "Land and Liberty." He demanded freedom from the feudal oppression of the great estates and restoration of the ancient village lands. Zapata was betrayed and slain, but not until he had advanced considerably the cause of the peasants.

Plutarco Elias Calles was the next important political figure to dominate the scene. Calles really seemed to have the interest of the peasants at heart and pushed agrarian reforms with unceasing zeal. He advanced the cause of the ejido and loosened the clutching grip of the Church. In the fields of labor his right hand man, Morones, organized the *Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana*, or C.R.O.M., as it was popularly called. This was a confederation of craft unions organized on the same basis as the American Federation of Labor.

However, it soon became apparent that though the zeal of Calles continued, as far as agrarian reform was concerned, he seemed to manifest a marked antipathy toward urban labor developments. In some peculiar way, known only to Senor Calles, he had become one of the richest industrialists in the country. His interests embraced many industries and he became particularly incensed at any threat of strike on the part of labor. There was a clash of interests. The original crusading zeal of the once poor school-master was quenched.

Senor Morones and the small clique who dominated the C.R.O.M., were also faring very well. They dashed about in the most expensive automobiles and the diamonds flashed by Morones became a public scandal. They all lived lavishly and their week-end parties in the suburb of Tlalpan were notorious. They formed a club called the Grupo Accion, which for luxury was unequalled except by millionaires' clubs in the United States.

Now Calles had always chosen the current presidential candidate. Against the advice of conservative friends he selected Lazaro Cardenas to succeed the safe and pliable gambling concessionaire, Abelardo Rodriguez. He was sure that he would be able to control Cardenas as he had controlled Rodriguez, Ortiz Rubio, and other presidential puppets. But this time it was different.

Everyone winked and grinned when Cardenas spoke of land reform, better conditions for labor and a democratized army. They had heard all this so many times before. But when the new president swung into action and began to put his reforms into effect, the grins faded.

Meanwhile, the Marxian-inspired Vicente Lombardo Toledano had broken off from the old, corrupt C.R.O.M., and formed the Mexican Confederation of Labor or C.T.M., as it is known. It was organized on the basis of Industrial Unionism and it established friendly relations with the American C.I.O.

The Army\* stood firmly behind the new president. With the backing of peasants, workers and soldiers, Cardenas was able to drive Calles, Morones and their satellites from the country.

Let no one be so naive as to suppose that Justice and Liberty have but to raise their heads to have Injustice and Bondage flee before them. Over and over again they have been trampled into the bloody mud. And so after centuries of struggle, sacrifice, torture and death, the advent of Lazaro Cardenas in 1934 still found the Mexicans in the grip of the great estates. The reason for this is simple. When the landed interests found themselves defeated in the agrarian areas they transferred their maleficent activities to other spheres. They packed the state governments, the courts, the labor tribunals, the local magistracies and the police, with their creatures. Their company guards roamed the countryside and spread terror in the hearts of the people. On an average, it required five years to press a successful suit through the courts.

Cardenas, supported by the rising tide of the labor movement under Lombardo Toledano was able to purge all these agencies of their reactionary and venal elements. New life seemed to surge through the courts and the monotonous line of decisions in favor of the landlords was broken.

Although from 1913 through 1934 about 20 million acres of land had been distributed, yet ninety-five per cent of all farm land was in holdings of over 250 acres (i. e., sufficiently large to require several outside laborers). 55 per cent was in holdings of over 25,000 acres each.

During the five years of the Cardenas incumbency more peasants have received land than in all the previous years put together and the per capita share has been almost twice as large. From 1915 through 1934, 20 million acres had been distributed. From 1935 through 1938, nearly 40 million acres. From 1915 through 1934, 759,000 heads of peasant families

had received land. From 1935 through 1938, 813,000. It has been estimated that by the end of 1938, 41 per cent of the arable land had been turned over to ejidos. And the process has been continuing since.

To sustain these moves Cardenas has set up a new institution, The National Bank of Ejido Credit, with branches in the chief agricultural regions.

There is a new Agrarian Department, a large part of whose duties consists in care and advice for ejidos. The members of this department flow from the newly established agricultural schools.

The Irrigation Commission is in process of revitalization and has borne fruit already in the great Laguna cotton growing region where the Palmito Dam has been constructed.

Furthermore, since 1935 the majority of new ejidos have been set up in collective form and on a bookkeeping basis. Moreover they have been set up in precisely those regions where collective agriculture can be most effective, namely, the regions of the great commercial crops—cotton, rice, hemp and wheat. A beginning has also been made in sugar cane and bananas. By the end of 1939 about one-third of all ejidos were in collective form, and they controlled the majority of Mexico's chief cash and export crops.

Though, as before stated, these gains are due chiefly to the revival of the labor movement and its effect upon the whole federal administration, yet Cardenas has steadfastly refused to allow himself to become a pawn in the hands of the Marxist labor leaders. He is, above all, a patriot, a Mexican and true to his Indian heritage.

Here is the man of the centuries, defender of the oppressed, champion of champions. And while he fights the privileged groups of his homeland and struggles against governmental pressure from abroad, he must whirl to stamp out the treachery inspired by greed of gain in his own ranks. He has the brave heart and the sturdy will that seeks economic freedom for the masses. *But he does not know the way.*

A presidential election has recently been held in Mexico. The results, not yet announced, will decide whether the liberal policies of Cardenas will be followed, or whether the forces of oppression will once more gain the upper hand. But even if the man of Cardenas' choice is elected, the hopeless economic maze constructed by the liberal government is not the solution.

Would that a copy of "Progress and Poverty" were put in the hands of Mexico's leaders!

**T**HE New Order in Europe:—Two-thirds of the Netherlands' poultry, and one-half of Denmark's cattle are being slaughtered—"because of a feed shortage"—and the carcasses are being exported to Germany.

## A Glance at Brazil

**B**RAZIL today presents a complex aspect. It is a large country, larger than the United States, and its 4 million people are made up of native Indians, African Negroes and Europeans (mostly Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German and Polish). Out of this strange mixture, a more or less homogeneous race has evolved. The Brazilian economy is predominantly agricultural, but the country is seeking to industrialize itself and is trying to build up trade relations with the rest of the world. It is still a new and undeveloped land (comparable to the United States in its early days), and yet it finds itself in the midst of the complicated and advanced economy of the rest of the civilized world.

The Brazilian economy today is as distressed as any other. Trade is depressed, and there is industrial stagnation. As with other countries in similar circumstances, the government is assuming more and more importance. Labor legislation, workmen's compensation, public works, relief, and all other legislative symptoms of a country with unsolved economic problems, are in full force. As a corollary, Brazil is leaning strongly toward nationalism. For instance, all insurance companies must become nationalized, that is Brazilian owned.

However, some favorable progress is being made in legislation. Brazil formerly had a very reactionary government concerned mainly with the welfare of the great landed interests. The present government, while by no means doing all that can be desired, is at least open-minded to progressive reforms. One of the latest proposals is that titles to land be clarified and legalized, and only title to cultivated land be recognized. The purpose is to discourage holding land out of use.

Brazil is rich in natural resources. It has the largest iron ore and alluvial gold deposits in the world, and is the greatest producer of coffee, wild rubber, and matte. The trade possibilities are great—if trade were free—but present war conditions have greatly upset Brazilian exports and imports. Exports to Europe have declined, and it is extremely doubtful whether the United States can make up the difference despite good intentions.

Japan and Germany both are important rivals of the United States in trade with Brazil. Despite Pan-American agreements, Brazil—as is natural—wants the best customer. She does not want to lean too strongly in one direction, at the sacrifice of other markets. Any cooperation we seek to make with her must be based upon performance.

In the July issue of *Brazil* (published by the American Brazilian Association), William Mazzocco writes: "I believe that the time is opportune for everybody concerned in the promotion of business between North and South America to do all possible to remove any obstacles that prevent the building of a reciprocal, lasting, substantial volume of business, between Brazil and North America."