

MEXICO - rich, fertile land of progress and poverty

by JOSEPH ZASHIN

ON a recent visit to Mexico it was interesting to see the slogan *LAND AND LIBERTY* (Tierra y Libertad) in the Diego Rivera revolutionary murals in the presidential palace in Mexico City. Previously, to get some background understanding of this fascinating country, I had read Professor Frank Tannerbaum's excellent, though slightly dated, *Mexico — the Struggle for Peace and Bread*. It is aptly titled. But no book title better describes Mexico than that of Henry George's searching and prophetic classic—*PROGRESS AND POVERTY*. For the picture which the country presents to the traveller is one of marked contrast. On the one hand, there is dynamic progress utilising imagination, artistry, idealism and advanced technology; on the other, a pattern of life mired in an ageless poverty and deprivation.

In the cities one sees the remarkable and spectacular spurt of progress. Mexico City, the capital, with a population of over 5 million ranks as one of the great cosmopolitan centres of the hemisphere. Its new architecture ranks with the foremost in the world. Broad new boulevards and expanding suburbs teem with traffic—50 per cent. more taxicabs than in New York City—and buses in endless parade. There are new industries, thriving commerce and splendid recreational facilities. The new University City, campus for the National University of Mexico, can hold its place proudly with the finest anywhere. Improved roads and travel facilities make the city a magnetic force which attracts new thousands from the countryside—some to seek better opportunity, others displaced by the increasing mechanisation of agriculture. In a lesser degree this is seen too, in Guadalajara the second largest city which in a few years has grown from 250,000 to more than three quarters of a million and the lesser cities and the new ones that are springing up. It is not all plus however, for this progress brings an increase in slum areas, with congestion, social problems and an intensification of the struggle to gain a livelihood.

But it is in the thousands of rural villages where the majority of Mexicans live that the most abject poverty is seen. It is so stark that one wonders where is that final stage which men could no longer tolerate of which Henry George spoke. Life exists here with scarcely a sign of the progress of technology that is 1961. Homes are hovels of ancient crumbling adobe or straw thatched rude huts while in the newer areas, shelters have been made from discarded tin, cardboard and packing cases.

In these hovels that would make a Dickens or a

Thackeray or a Zola shudder, families of ten and more live in one or two crowded rooms. The word "rooms" is used with a quizzical question mark. Included are the newborn infant and on up through the grandparents and even great-grandparents. What existence is this without running water, often without light, and only a tiny fire on a stone hearth by which to cook? It is all so primitive, with no toilet facilities and scarcely any furniture that one wonders whether these people live in the 20th Century or in the 19th, 18th or 17th.

Some will say that Mexico is a poor country—and these are its poor. But to an observer this is not true. Mexico is a land of abundance with enough for many more than its present 30 millions. The history of her mineral wealth tells of a phenomenal production of gold, silver, copper and a host of lesser metals, and dazzling opulence of precious stones. This was the wealth which lured the bloodthirsty *Conquistadores* from the coming of Cortes in 1519 and on in an ever increasing stream of adventurers and plunderers. Whole fleet of vessels bore this wealth back to mother Spain, creating for her such an easy affluence that she lost the incentive to develop the industry and trade within her home borders. Soon this flow of gems and precious metal attracted the avarice of the English, Dutch, French and Portuguese and led to raid and foray, pirate and buccaneer, war on land and on sea, and ultimately the reshaping of colonial power and the history of the New World.

Richer even than the produce of Mexico's mines has been the cornucopia that developed when the Spaniard turned his attention to the soil. From great grants of land that encompassed thousands of acres, many being virtual empires came a flood of agricultural products and great herds of cattle and beasts. From the native, the newcomer learned of maize and tobacco, tomatoes, sugar, coffee and a host of others, many of which were in turn introduced into other newly-opened areas of Western exploitation—of which the great valleys of California are a vivid example. From the native came the knowledge which was the basis for the cattle-ranching and horse-raising of Western United States.

During all the period of Spanish rule, the products of Mexico were shipped abroad to satisfy an insatiable and distant greed. And the people of the land toiled at harsh labour, their reward a pittance to keep them alive.

With the Mexican revolution sparked by Father Hidalgo in 1810 and in the century and a half since, there has been the hope that the lot of the common

people might be bettered, that the stark, chill hand of poverty might be lifted. It has been a long struggle against the great landowner and the foreign exporter and the native elements who were blind to the misery of their people and sought only selfish, luxurious living for themselves.

Prominent amongst the new programmes has been that for land reform. The seizure of the rich *haciendas*, the decrees limiting the number of hectares one could own, measures to divide the land amongst the landless poor, the *ejido* programme with its buttressing of government-supported credit, and the expropriation of foreign holdings and strict laws denying foreign ownership except under regulated conditions.

Much has been done with the land. One can drive through the great State of Sonora which lies south of the Arizona border and see vast fields of wheat and grain and cotton and vegetables. This has been achieved on arid lands where the magic of irrigation has transformed the desert into a land flowing with milk and honey. This State has earned the title of the 'breadbasket' of Mexico. And of its other produce, thousands of carloads and many shiploads are exported to the United States and to places as distant as Japan. Here is great progress—for those rich green fields stretching as far as the eye can see remind one of the mechanised agriculture of America's great Middle West and its cotton and tobacco South.

Yet what is the lot of the people? This progress has had its attendant poverty. The hunger for land has driven them from it to seek a living in the cities that serve as centres for warehousing, packing and shipping. The people who remain to toil in the short seasons of planting and harvest live on the fringes of the land—almost like a kind of Biblical gleaning which leaves them the corners of the fields. Here they live in the same miserable shacks, abject and deprived.

Meanwhile, progress has raised up a new, growing middle class of merchants, members of the professions and those engaged in the service industries. For them, life brings more rewards, a style of living that exhibits itself in the new suburban *fraccionamientos*—subdivisions—where land costs multiply and new residences rise that rival the best in Beverly Hills and on Long Island. Life for the middle class is comfortable, based on an abundance of low-cost labour.

What can the government of Mexico do about the disparity in the living conditions of its people? It is a government committed to social reform. The words of its leaders are engraved on stone monuments that proclaim that the revolution cannot end while social injustice exists. The efforts have been manifold. As well as land reform there has been socialisation of various industries including the railway, oil and even the movies. There are social security measures which attract many thousands and a start has been made on providing low

cost housing at present mainly for government employees.

This programme of government action is not easy to classify under any of the forms we know. Is it democratic? Is it socialist? Is it a planned economy with a benevolent form of dictatorial paternalism? Is it moving towards communism? It is difficult to give a positive answer. Each of the categories seems to overlap. When one tries to define the terms—as Henry George so wisely urged for any discussion—it becomes a confusing mingling of doctrines and philosophies. Much government policy was due to a stop-gap seizing of expedients to achieve political power, to strengthen federal control, to eliminate bandit elements and to cope with the ambitions of local leaders.

One goes back to the slogan in Diego Rivera's mural and the title of this journal and there rests the hope for Mexico's millions—*LAND AND LIBERTY*. To give them these is not by the storming of palaces, by the breaking up of *haciendas*, by the distribution of land. The test is not whether a man may own a single hectare or a thousand. It is rather in the tax reform that Henry George proposed in his *Progress and Poverty*—the taking of the land rental value which is created by the people to be used for the people. This would produce the revenue that is needed to aid the development of this awakened land. It would make Mexico less dependent on the whims and strings of outside aid and capital. It would end the spiral of speculation in city land which drives its price upward until it rests as a heavy, discouraging burden on every phase of life. It would spur into use idle land now held out of production. It would give those who labour the full product of their toil.

The great reform in Mexico will not come from the upheld sword, the fiery pen or the impassioned oratory. It will come from a careful preparation of tax assessment rolls on which each plot of Mexico's land pays its just and proper rental to the whole people, for whom all of the land is a birthright in common. Mexico is a rich country—a rich land that can ensure continuing progress and disappearing poverty. In the office of the Tax Assessor is the key to its liberty.

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