

warehouses maintain food supplies. However, a large part of the population is

Ordinary People Face Economic Challenges

The Dispossessed in Rural Mexico

Obtaining an understanding of how the ordinary people lived in the middle of the nineteenth century is not easy. Illiterate, these people left few records. Much of the information about them comes from documents written by the elites. At the constitutional convention of 1856-1857, the Mexican reformer Ponciano Arriaga denounced the poverty of the dispossessed. He proposed a reform of truly revolutionary proportions. It would put unused land in the hands of the landless. Needless to say, the deputies ignored the proposal.

#1 WHILE A FEW INDIVIDUALS possess immense idle lands that could support millions of people, the great majority of our citizens live in the most abject poverty, denied property, homes, and work.

A hundred constitutions and thousands of laws may proclaim abstract rights and beautiful though impractical theories, but our people cannot be free, republican, or happy under the absurd economic system that exists in Mexico.

There are Mexican landowners who occupy (if one can apply the word "occupation" to a purely imaginary thing) a greater extent of land than one of our sovereign States, greater even than one or more European countries.

Over this vast expanse of land, much of which lies idle, awaiting the fructifying touch of labor, live scattered four to five million Mexicans who have no other means of subsistence than agriculture yet are forbidden the use of the land. Since they cannot emigrate with the hope of making an honest living, they must become robbers or vagabonds or submit to the yoke of the landed monopolist who forces them to accept intolerable conditions of employment.

What reasonable hope can these unhappy men have of finding a legal escape from their condition of abject serfdom? How can anyone believe that the magic words of a written law will transform them into free citizens who know and defend the dignity and importance of their rights?

We proclaim *ideas* and forget *things*. We launch on discussions of rights and ignore the concrete facts. The constitution should be the law of the *land*, but we do nothing about the state of the *land*.

While our statesmen are busy organizing chambers, dividing powers, assigning powers and attributes, defining and limiting sovereignties, the rich landowners laugh at them, for they know that they are the true masters of society,

that true power is in their hands, that they exercise actual sovereignty. Our people justly complain that constitutions come and go, that governments rise and fall, that the law codes grow ever more mountainous and complex, that proclamations and "plans" follow swiftly on each other's heels. But after all these changes and upheavals, after so much disorder and sacrifice, nothing beneficial emerges for the people, for the classes that provide the soldiers who shed their blood in our civil wars, who fill the prisons and toil on the public works, who suffer all the evils of society and none of its blessings.

The unhappy farm laborers, especially those of the Indian race, are sold and lose their freedom for life. Their masters fix the wages they receive, provide them with such food and clothing as they please and charge them what they please. Imprisonment, torture, and infamy are the lot of the peon who should object to the landowner's decrees and orders.

With some very honorable exceptions, the rich Mexican landowner (who rarely knows his land foot-by-foot), or the majordomo who represents him, may be compared to a feudal lord of the Middle Ages. On his domain, with more or less formalities, he makes laws and executes them, administers justice and exercises civil powers, imposes taxes and fines, has jails, chains, and jailors, inflicts punishments and tortures, monopolizes trade and forbids any other business than that of his estate to be carried on without his consent. As a rule the judges and other public officials on these estates are the landowner's servants or tenants; they are henchmen incapable of acting freely, impartially, or justly, or of enforcing any law other than the absolute will of the master.

The landowners employ an infinite and complex variety of devices to exploit their peons, servants, or tenants. They force them to work without pay even on the days set aside for rest. They compel them to accept rotten seeds or sick animals which are charged to their trifling wages. They burden them with large dues and with parochial fees and taxes in excess of the scale agreed upon beforehand between the parish priest and the landowner or his majordomo. They force them to buy all their needs on the estate, paying them with vouchers or paper money which do not circulate in any other market. At certain periods of the year they supply them with shoddy goods whose price is fixed by the landowner or his majordomo, thus burdening them with debts from which they can never free themselves. They forbid them to use pastures and woods, fuel and water, or even the wild fruit of the fields, without the express permission of the master. In short, the landowner has over his tenants an unlimited and completely irresponsible power. □

The Indians Lose Their Land

Following the independence of Mexico, the elites purchased land from the State, the Church, and the Indians. The already large estates grew both in size and number.

The Indians often held their lands through their communities rather than through individual title. It was nearly impossible to purchase land from those communities, although the individual Indian was vulnerable to pressures to sell

privately held land. Aware of that characteristic, the elites sought first to break up the community holdings into individual titles and then to induce the individual to sell. That movement was underway by mid-century and quickly divested many of the Indians of their lands.

The Mexican Constitution of 1857

The Liberals imposed a constitution on Mexico in 1857 that prohibited "corporations" from owning land. The *ejido*, the Indian community, was legally a corporation. Thus, Article 27 of that constitution abolished the *ejido*, which in effect subjected the Indians to a variety of pressures to sell their individual plots of land. The Mexican Indians' days of landholding were numbered.

ARTICLE 27. Private property shall not be taken without the consent of the owner, except for reasons of public utility and by prior indemnification. The law shall determine which authority shall make the expropriation and the provisions by which it shall be carried out.

No civil or ecclesiastical corporation of whatever character, designation, or object, shall have the legal capacity to acquire ownership to, or administer in its own behalf, landed property, except for buildings immediately and directly related to the services or purposes of said corporations. □

Legal Protection Ends for the Lands of the Indians of Colombia

While visiting the Orinoco Valley of Colombia in the 1850s, Isaac F. Holton, a U.S. citizen, observed that the legal protection afforded the lands of Indian communities was coming to an end. As elsewhere in Latin America, that legal change meant the eventual loss of the Indian lands to the large landowners.

I PROCEEDED SOUTH TO Choachí. This is a tolerable village, standing on a level spot on the sidehill, but a mile or more from the roaring stream that flowed along the base. Both sides of this river are thickly settled with Indians. I have not seen so much cultivation in all this country, and the scene delighted me inexpressibly. The district of Choachí contains 4691 inhabitants; Ubaque, a little farther on, 3399; while on the other side of the stream, the district of Fómeque contains 6645. The amount of white blood in all this multitude is quite small.

The land here has been kept in the hands of the Indians by a benevolent provision of the law, restraining them from selling except according to certain provisions; but, with the advancing ideas of liberty, it is seen that it is undemocratic to restrain thus a man's liberty. The matter is now with the provincial legislatures, and in some provinces these reserves—*resguardas*—can be sold only at auction, and in others, any man that can persuade one of these thoughtless

Source: Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1857.

Source: Isaac F. Holton, *New Granada: Twenty Months in the Andes* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), pp. 108-109.

aborigines to sell to him can buy at any price, however small. It grieves me to hear that large numbers have sold. Among the most diligent buyers of *resguardas* is the cura of Choachí, who is now the owner of land that once was occupied by a score of families. □

Land Monopoly in Pernambuco, Brazil

In underpopulated Brazil, a few people claimed the land, although they worked only a tiny portion of it. The poor found it nearly impossible to gain access to the unused land. Lack of access doomed them to continued poverty. In 1856, a newspaper in Recife, capital of Pernambuco, pointed out that the large landholdings created a barrier to both the economic growth and development of the nation.

WHAT FUTURE HAS THE continuously growing population of the interior? Will the new additions devote themselves to agriculture? No. The more enlightened part will come here to Recife to seek its fortune, to solicit some ridiculous job. The rest will go to the towns and other centers of population and there spend a miserable life because among us there is no industry that offers the free worker security and regular pay. . . .

And why do the youths of these unfortunate families, instead of entering into such precarious careers in public service, not take up farming? And for what reason, instead of learning the skills of a tailor, bricklayer, or carpenter, etc., do the sons of the less favored families not go back into the interior, why don't they become farmers? Why don't the inhabitants of the interior cultivate the soil? Why do those young people hunt out the towns? For all these questions there is but one answer and unfortunately it is convincing!

In the social state in which we live, the means of subsistence of the father of the family do not increase in proportion to the number of children, the general consequence of which is that the sons are poorer than their fathers and they possess less capital. Now, agriculture is closed by an insurmountable barrier to the less favored man, to anyone who does not have a certain amount of money. Agriculture is the chief source of production, the chief hope of our country. But since agriculture is closed by a barrier, it is necessary that that barrier fall, cost whatever it may.

And what is that barrier? Large landholdings. It is the terrible curse which has ruined and depopulated many other nations.

This region which extends along the entire coast of our province and inland for ten, twelve, or, at times, fifteen and eighteen leagues is divided into sugar plantations and properties whose dimensions vary from a quarter of a league square to two and three and even four and five leagues square.

Here, as the growing of sugarcane demands, a certain amount of land, which cannot be found everywhere, is devoted to the cultivation of the cane. Other parts of the plantation are dedicated to the woods that are necessary for

Source: *Diario de Pernambuco* (Recife), March 24, 1856.

sugar production, the pastures for the care of the oxen, and the gardens for the planting of manioc, indispensable for the feeding of the slaves. But still a major part of the plantations possesses vast extensions of uncultivated land that would be especially well suited for the small farmer and which, if cultivated, would be sufficient to furnish abundantly flour, corn, beans, etc., to all the population of the province and of the neighboring provinces with some produce left over for exportation.

The proprietors refuse to sell these lands or even to rent them. If you own thirty or forty *contos de réis* you can buy a sugar plantation, but if you are poor and want to buy or rent a small patch of land, you won't find any.

This is what makes the unproductive population of the cities, increases regularly the number of solicitors of public employment, and raises daily the crimes against property; and the country becomes poorer day by day in consequence of the increase of the number of consumers while the number of producers remains stationary or at best increases at a much slower rate.

But the large landowners say that they are far from refusing the poor people the land they need to cultivate. They say that when these landless poor ask for it they give them at a small rental or at times gratuitously not only land to plant but wood to build homes. That does happen but only at the pleasure of the large landowner.

Anytime he wants to, for any caprice or because they refuse to vote for his candidates or for any reason, he can order them off the land, and they have no recourse. How can you ask these people to plant when they have no certainty of harvesting? What incentive exists to induce them to improve the land from which they can be evicted at any moment?

On the land of the large property holders they do not enjoy any public right because they do not have any freedom; for them, the large landowners are the police, the courts, the administration, in short, everything. The lot of these unhappy people differs in nothing from the serfs of the Middle Ages. □

The Standard of Living of Workers in Northeastern Brazil

As Brazil's coastal towns and cities grew, a new class timidly appeared, a group neither slave nor slaveowner. It consisted of small merchants, young professionals and civil servants, new military officers, the workers, and the artisans. Crushed as they were in the economic vise between the large mass of slaves below and the powerful slaveowners above, their economic lot was not an easy one. One of the newspapers of Pernambuco commented in 1849 on the lowly and difficult position of the free workers, providing a glimpse, however inconclusive, of their standard of living.

THE AVERAGE DAILY WAGE of a man is 640 réis. Socially considered the man is the unification of three persons: husband, wife, and son. He must bear the maximum load of work, the work which will supply the other two.

Source: Gilberto Freyre, *Nordeste* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1937), p. 237.

Supposing that each one eats a pound of meat per day . . . he will spend 300 réis on meat; if we add 80 réis for flour and 20 for firewood, we will have the man spend 400 réis per day on food or about 12\$000 milreis per month; and as he must spend on housing about a third, more or less, of what he spends for food, this comes to another 4\$000 milreis per month for a total of 16\$000. He has left about four thousand milreis to spend on holy days, during sickness, for clothing, etc., which is impossible for a man who wants to live hygienically and honorably. But as it is well known that the poor live also with honor, it is interesting to learn how this is done. Dry meat, salted and dry—and many times spoiled—fish, flour without manioc, bad food, a hard bed, an uncomfortable house, ragged clothing are the products which the poor use. Even these come in limited amounts in order not to exceed the budget.

Under such conditions the family can only suffer. It will not have complete physical growth; its quantity of work will be less; its offspring will be deficient. From such a malnourished family comes the weak and cowardly soldier, the sensitive and powerless sailor. . . . □

Description of the Indians of Andean Colombia

At the middle of the nineteenth century, the Indians still predominated in those countries from Mexico southward through Central America and the west coast of South America to Bolivia and Paraguay. The elite generally considered them a burden, a barrier to progress. Thus, their descriptions of the indigenous populations tend to be negative. Around 1860, the Colombian scholar José María Samper wrote the following essay on the Indians in his country. Although his views might be considered moderate, perhaps even enlightened, comparatively speaking, the essay reveals prejudices and lack of understanding. In the final analysis, it probably says more about the whites than the Indians.

THE CHARACTER OF THE MASS OF THE Andine population (purely indigenous) is notable for patient labour, religious sentiment carried to the point of idolatry and the grossest superstition, lack of every truly artistic sentiment, love of a sedentary life, of immobility and routine, a family full of timidity, dissimulated malice which somewhat tempers the relative stupidity of the *muisca*, a certain impassibility which makes him indifferent to all strong emotions, a great curiosity respecting purely material or exterior things, spirit of hospitality but slightly developed, and a patent incapacity to obey the impulse of Progress. . . . The Indian of the plain is wanting in enthusiasm and passion, but loves marriage and is faithful to his hearth and wife. Moreover, he loves his little bit of soil to servility and takes *chicha* to an excess which frequently leads him to drunkenness. He adorns processions and mummeries and displays much credulity for the marvellous. Weak in hand-to-hand struggle because his strength resides only in his neck, back, and legs, and without any dash in combat, he displays nevertheless

Source: "Description of the Llanura and the Llanero of Colombia" in A. Curtis Wilgus (ed.), *Readings in Latin American Civilization* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1946), pp. 249-250.