

THE ECONOMIC RENAISSANCE  
OF THE INDIAN COMMUNITIES  
OF MEXICO

Although the problems of the Indian communities of Mexico are not identical with those of other Latin American countries, they are nevertheless similar, and I am sure that the solutions that have been tried in Mexico can also be used in other countries on that continent.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

The present territory of the Republic of Mexico was divided, in the period prior to the Spanish conquest, into two great cultural provinces: There was on the one hand the Northern region which was generally inhabited by nomadic tribes—hunters and gatherers whom the Mexicans used to call by the name of *chichimecas*—and on the other hand the central region of the

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country which extended towards the North-West as far as Sinaloa along the Western Sierra Madre and towards the North-East as far as Soto la Marina along the Eastern Sierra—a province which is now called Mesoamerica—and which then comprised various native peoples with a plurality of languages and characteristic cultural features, whose manner of life was based essentially on the cultivation of corn, beans and other edible plants and who lived without exception in cities organized already according to a political system which was essentially monarchical and theocratic.

Among the *chichimecas* one could hardly speak of a system of landownership. The vast stretches of the treeless semi-desert plains of the North were unsuitable for being permanently appropriated by these tribes and divided into fixed parcels. The area was instead traversed by gatherers of roots, fruit and insects and by hunters of quadrupeds among which deer, rabbits and hare were of special importance. On the other hand, among the sedentary tribes of Mesoamerica, as for example among the Aztecs at the time immediately preceding the Spanish conquest, there were public lands belonging to the state and private lands belonging to the nobility or to the clans. The public lands produced the revenues that were used to pay the expenses incurred by civil, military and ecclesiastical functionaries. Some of these lands, especially the lands acquired by conquest in other parts of Mexico, belonged to the temples to whom they had been granted by the king.<sup>1</sup>

The privately owned lands were, first, those of the plebeians (*macehualtin*) and secondly, those belonging to the noblemen (*pipiltin*) among whom the king enjoyed of course a privileged position.

Mexican society was divided into clans (*calpullis*), and the lands belonging to them were the collective property of the clan. But they were broken up into parcels so that they could be cultivated, and each parcel was handed over to the head of a family who enjoyed its use for life, and when he died, its use passed generally to his sons. However, the right to a parcel

<sup>1</sup> Caso, Alfonso, "La tenencia de la tierra entre los antiguos mexicanos," *Memorias del Colegio Nacional*, vol. IV-2, Mexico, 1959.

did not imply ownership of it since the real owner was the clan and not the individual member. The *macehual* had not only the right but also the duty to cultivate his parcel and forfeited its use when he had failed to sow it for two years.

The Spaniards called a *calpulli* a *barrio* (district), thinking that it represented simply a territorial division of the village. The individual member of a clan (*macehual*) whom the Spaniards called a "plebeian" paid the required tribute for the expenses of the clan and temple and the general expenses of the state, but he was a free laborer.

The lands of the nobility were individually owned; they were inherited by their male descendants and could be sold to other noblemen. These lands had originally been granted by the king to those who had distinguished themselves in war. But the fact that they could be transmitted through inheritance was creating a class situation. As a result, the land lost its primitive origin as a "recompense" and remained the property of noblemen whose nobility was based, not only on this economic distinction, but on blood. This explains why some landowners were women of the nobility.

These lands were worked by serfs called *tlalmaitles* or *mayerques*, and whom the Spaniards called "tenant farmers" (*terrasgueros*). The *mayerque* belonged with the land and went with it when it was sold to a new owner. He had no direct obligation to the state, only to his master. In addition to owing his master a considerable portion of his harvest, he was obliged to render personal services like repairing the house or bringing water and firewood. The wives of the *mayerques* were also obliged to render domestic services like sweeping the house, cooking the meals, etc. The situation of these *mayerques* was very similar to that of the serfs *adscripti glebae* in medieval Europe.

The lands of the nobility were called *pilalli*. On the other hand, the communal lands of the *calpulli* (clan) were called *calpulalli*. In speaking of the organization of the *ejidos* (public lands), I shall have to insist again on the similarity between these *calpulalli*, the lands belonging to the clans, and the organization of the modern *ejido*.

There was a similar system of landownership in other

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villages in central Mexico (Texcoco, Tacuba) and in other places, as for example in the state of Oaxaca. This was very different from the situation in the Northern part of the country, which was occupied by tribes of gatherers and hunters with a nomadic way of life.

This dual situation which prevailed in Mexico before the conquest explains the attitude of the Spanish conquerors towards the natives. In the Northern part of the country and on the high central plateau—the habitat of the *chichimecas*—the natives could not be reduced to the condition of serfs to the conquerors, for the population density was minimal, their customs nomadic, and they were lacking in economic and political organization. In Mesoamerica on the other hand, where the natives lived in villages and towns and had ample economic resources, as well as a military, religious and political organization which manifested itself in the organization of kingdoms and empires, the natives were already prepared and fit to be used by the conquerors; all the Spanish conquerors had to do was to assume the role of the native aristocrats who ruled in the various nations that occupied the territory of Mesoamerica.

This was so not only in Mexico, but throughout the continent. Where the Spaniards encountered a pure tribal organization, the natives were simply exterminated. This happened in the West Indies, Northern Mexico, the Southern part of the continent and in the forests of South America. On the other hand, where they encountered a politically advanced administrative, social and economic organization, they founded first viceroalties and then captaincies which allowed the conquerors to use the Indians as their serfs. Here, the native population was not of course destroyed; no one destroys his slaves. But the "wild Indians," as they were later called, were exterminated.

The problem was how to reorganize the colonies. The native masters were at first kept in power till they could slowly but surely be displaced by Spanish officials (governors, magistrates, etc.).

But if from the political point of view the conquerors were transformed into officials, from an economic point of view, the system of so-called *encomiendas* permitted the establishment of a quasi-feudal aristocracy for the economic exploitation of

the conquered nations.<sup>2</sup> Theoretically, a conqueror or settler was entrusted with a village for the purpose of instructing the Indians in the principles of the Christian religion and of guarding the souls of the recent converts so they would not abandon their faith and relapse into the worship of their old gods. Naturally this service had to be paid for, and the people were therefore obliged to deliver to their *encomendero* offerings of produce (corn, beans, turkeys, etc.) or of manufactured goods, especially blankets, though they also delivered gold jewelry and ornaments of feathers. Or else the village was taxed a certain amount of money to be handed over to the *encomendero* in cash.

This was legal and permissible. But naturally, if the *encomendero* felt that he had the strong backing of the central authorities, he felt free to exact a larger amount than was his due and even to beat and kill the natives who had been entrusted to him so they would gain the eternal salvation of their souls.

Hence the creation of a rich and idle aristocracy. The tribute flowed into the coffers of the *encomenderos*, and being for the most part men of limited culture, they wasted it in the acquisition of showy arms and horses, on parades and tournaments, festivities and amusements, with the feeling that at last the time had come to leave behind the misery that had tortured these second-born sons and knights-errant in the harsh soil of Castile.<sup>3</sup>

If the conquerors and settlers still led this life of luxury and pomp, with the feeling that they had some merit in having conquered the land or in having been the first to arrive there, their descendants, having been born to a soft life, thought only of gaining as much wealth as possible and were constantly afraid that the king would enact laws whereby the lands and people entrusted to them would instead become dependent on the crown. For the *encomiendas*, unlike the fiefs, were not permanent. But though they were by their very nature not even hereditary, in

<sup>2</sup> Zavala, Silvio, *La encomienda indiana*, Madrid, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> Benítez, Fernando, *La vida criolla en el siglo XVI*, Colegio de México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1953.

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most cases it was the wife, son or daughter of the original *encomendero* who received the *encomienda* upon his death.

The kings of Spain who had fought the feudal lords for two centuries till Ferdinand and Isabel had succeeded in uniting the country had no desire to create more feudal lords in the newly conquered lands. The *encomenderos* felt this threat and felt it to the point where the sons of the conquerors were, to use a sixteenth-century expression, ready to "run off with the land" and to gain independence for New Spain in spite of their protestations and oaths of loyalty to the king.

The punishment inflicted on the Avilas, as well as the exile of the son of the Conqueror, dampened the enthusiasm for this type of conspiracy. But the *encomenderos* never slackened in their demands to have their *encomiendas* converted into permanent possessions.

The *encomienda* system required the inhabitants of the villages to pay tributes to their *encomenderos* in addition to what they paid the king, gave to their chiefs (*caciques*) and, frequently, for the construction of convents and churches and for the upkeep of ecclesiastical functionaries. But theoretically at least, the communal lands remained in the hands of their original owners. The *encomienda* system did not take away the ownership of the land, but imposed a fixed contribution which the landowners had to pay.

The result of the gifts, compositions and reductions was very different. Here the land did pass to a new owner, and the village found itself stripped of its land so that the master who received the gift could tend their cattle, sow their wheat and cultivate their orchards.<sup>4</sup>

Still, some honest Spanish officials like Zurita informed the kings of Spain that the so-called "idle lands" which were not under cultivation were not really idle, but only fallow according to the accepted method of growing corn, which consisted in cutting down the secondary vegetation, burning it and sowing in the thin layer of soil that could be reached with the *coa*—the

<sup>4</sup> Zavala, Silvio, and Miranda, José, "Instituciones indígenas en la Colonia," *Métodos y resultados de la política indigenista en México, Memorias del Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, vol. VI, p. 39 ff., Mexico, 1954.

stick used in sowing—a method which only allowed the land to be used for one or two years, after which it had to be left alone from six to ten years, depending on the region, so that the soil would recover its fertility.<sup>5</sup>

The method of distributing these so-called “idle lands” and of deporting entire villages to different places was legal or accepted, even though unjust, but was greatly aggravated in practice by the abuses committed by the *encomenderos* which led to interminable lawsuits which, in the vast majority of cases, remained unsolved or ended with a denial of justice.

The situation became still worse towards the end of the sixteenth century when the so-called “congregations” were introduced: All scattered Indians were forced to congregate in villages. Some Indians obtained notable advantages, but the coercive procedure had to be abandoned later on because of its injustice and inefficiency, though not before many Spaniards had in this way obtained arable land that had previously belonged to the Indians.

Finally, the land grants for the establishment of cattle, horse or sheep ranches slowly deprived the villages of their lands. Although the law required an investigation to be held to determine if it was not prejudicial to the village, it was in fact always possible to obtain a declaration from the residents by fraud, intimidation or bribery and thus to consummate the grant formally without any apparent violation of justice or the law. In this whole matter of protecting the land of the Indians, it must be noted that one would be greatly deceived if, after examining the legislation on this matter from the colonial period to our own days, one were to believe that it had really protected Indian interests. In theory, the regulations of the kings and viceroys, continued later by the laws of the republic, were to protect the lands of the Indians. In practice, the villages were robbed of their lands and the law served only as a protective mantle to obscure the real injustice. For if the Spanish laws were up to a point ineffective, unable to protect the lands of the Indians, the laws of the republic, inspired by liberal

<sup>5</sup> Zorita, Alonso de, “Breve y Sumaria Relación...” in J. García Icazbalceta, *Nueva Colección de Documentos*, vol. III, p. 95, Mexico, 1891.

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principles, were more generous in theory but equally disastrous in practice, in that they required the destruction of communal property, transforming into private property what the Indians had maintained from time immemorial as the property of the whole community.

The native who owned an individual parcel was unable to defend himself against the large landowner and the native politician, and he had to sell his land and go to work as a day laborer on the large *haciendas* which were growing little by little all over the country and whose owners were interested in acquiring more and more land from the villages, not for the land itself, for their enormous domains could no longer even be cultivated, but to prevent the natives from devoting themselves to the care of their individual properties. In this way, the natives were despoiled of their lands and turned into cheap labor for the profit of the *hacienda*.<sup>6</sup>

This explains not only the formation of these large estates, but also the flight of the Indians to the mountains and deserts, the least desirable places from the point of view of agriculture. Only in those places where the cultivation of the soil was difficult could they preserve their independence and continue to lead a communal life without transforming themselves into peons for the *haciendas* surrounding their village. And this explains why their native languages and traditional costumes were preserved in those places better than in the valleys.

In the year 1910, before the outbreak of the revolution, the greater part of the cultivable land in Mexico belonged to 800 families, and the 8,245 *haciendas* covered 217 million acres or 40 percent of the *total* area of the country. Only a tiny part remained in the possession of small landowners, villages and communities. It was this monopoly of land by a few, with the consequent deprivation not only of economic, but also of political and even civil liberty, that provoked the revolution. Beginning as a purely political movement against the dictator Porfirio Díaz and his group, who had been in power for thirty years, it turned into a social movement aiming at economic

<sup>6</sup> Chevalier, François, *La formation des grands domaines au Mexique*, Institut d'Ethnologie, Paris, 1952.



liberation and especially at repossession of the land, and headed by leaders like Emiliano Zapata in the South.<sup>7</sup>

It was then that an institution was born—the *ejido*—in accordance with the principles of the revolution. Only in name did it resemble the Spanish organization of the lands surrounding a village and serving as pasture for cattle in Spain and in colonial Mexico. From the beginning—the law of January 6, 1915—the *ejido* was conceived as communal property belonging to the village and consisting not only of pasture for cattle—though this was included—but especially of farm land, whether irrigated or dependent on the weather. Later, in 1917, the institution of the *ejido* was included in article 27 of the constitution and in the agrarian laws which were passed to put the constitutional precept into practice.

This communal property, the *ejido*, has certain features which make it approach the old Indian system of landownership by the clan (*calpulli*). Like their land, the *calpulalli*, the *ejido* is communal and non-transferable, whether by sale or in any other way. It cannot be given away by bequest, legacy or donation, and a parcel, an internal subdivision within the land of the *ejido*, cannot be transmitted to one's heirs. It is less of a property than the right to use a property. The proprietor is the community itself, as in the case of the *calpulalli* which has already been described.

As in that case, the individual has not only a right to cultivate his parcel, but also an obligation, and if he does not do so, the community through its agents can deprive him of it and give it to other persons who have a right to the use of land.

Finally, the land of the *ejido* is subject to completely different property regulations from the ones that govern privately owned land. There are certain products that cannot be disposed of even by the community as a whole, except with the consent of the federal authorities.

Thus the *ejido* can be said to have some of the aspects of

<sup>7</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, Gonzalo, "La Reforma Agraria," in *Métodos y resultados de la política indigenista en México, Memorias del Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, vol. VI, p. 199, Mexico, 1954.

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public property. This distinguishes it from private property which is governed by civil law.

Because they have left behind the valleys to climb up the mountains or to stay on the edge of the desert, the native communities have also inevitably been left behind by the progressive development of the country.

When progress does arrive, it arrives after a long delay. This is so with communications—first the railway and the telegraph and later the highway and the telephone—with schools, health campaigns, agricultural and industrial promotions and new techniques of cultivation. Everything that constitutes progress in Mexico since 1910 has reached the Indian communities only after a delay and in many instances they still do not enjoy those benefits.

But since the triumph of the revolution in 1917, or even earlier, all governors and political leaders have never, in all their revolutionary projects, forgotten that a great injustice has been perpetrated on the Indian communities, and it can be said in a sense that the very essence of the revolution consists in a revindication of the Indian and the Indian community.

It can therefore be asserted that the solutions to the Indian problem which have been tried in Mexico till today were all inspired by the generous ideal of protecting the Indian communities, even if these solutions took more or less time and were also more or less effective.

This is a convenient place to point out that “protection” does not here refer to the destruction of racial discrimination which, fortunately, does not exist in Mexico, unlike other countries where men of different races live together. In Mexico, the distinction between Indian and non-Indian is *not a racial distinction*. If a native learns Spanish, leaves his community and goes to work on a farm or in a factory, no matter in which town or city of the republic, he ceases to be considered a native and becomes a Mexican worker who enjoys the same social position as any other worker who was born in the city.

This shows that the distinction between Indian and non-Indian in Mexico is not a racial, but a cultural and social, distinction. I have elsewhere defined our concept of a native,

which is not so much the concept of an individual as of the community to which he belongs.<sup>8</sup>

For a community to be considered native, it must of course have certain physical traits which are characteristically native. But this is a minor distinction, the important ones being that the community speaks a native language, that it has traditions, concepts, customs and even clothes used only by natives and, as the last but also the most important of all characteristics, that the individual member of the community considers himself a native, distinct from the individuals belonging to the surrounding white or mixed communities.

The demographic data of the last census indicate that the native population, like the population of the country in general, continues to increase. A good part of these natives, for reasons indicated above, abandon their communities and, after settling down in mixed communities, lose their identity as natives. Nevertheless, the natives who remain increase the population within their community and create a problem because the available land does not increase in the same proportion. This necessitates further subdivision of the communal parcel or *ejido* or else migration to other places in search of work. These migrations are generally seasonal and connected with the harvest of certain crops like coffee in the Soconusco (Chiapas), pineapple in Loma Bonita (Veracruz), cotton in Northern Mexico and in the United States. These are the so-called "migrations of swallows" because the emigrants return to their places of origin. One of these "migrations of swallows" takes place year after year to the Southern United States and creates the so-called "*bracero problem*"—a problem more closely connected with the rural population of mixed blood, though Indians continue to take part in this migratory movement.

Among the solutions put in practice for the protection of the natives and their communities, one must mention colonization and the exploitation of other natural resources, especially forests.

<sup>8</sup> Caso, Alfonso, "Indigenismo," *Colección Culturales Indígenas*, no. I, Instituto Nacional Indigenista, p. 7 ff., Mexico, 1958.

COLONIZATION

As a result of the orographic and hydrographic conditions of the Mexican high plateau, a large part of the highlands is semi-desert and only in recent times, thanks to the policies of the federal government, has it been possible to irrigate some of this land. But the vast majority of the land must wait for the rainy season before it can be sown. This is why it is known as the "storm lands."

But these lands have now been cultivated for many centuries, especially in the central region of the high plateau, and the rainfall is not so regular as to prevent frequent droughts, all of which makes agriculture very precarious. On the other hand, in the two coastal regions, on the Pacific as well as on the Gulf, rainfall is generally more regular. Moreover, the land has not been as intensively cultivated as on the high plateau and is thus for the most part excellent from an agricultural point of view.

The unhealthy climate of these regions had made them ill-suited for colonization. But those pests can now be controlled and some of them have already been eradicated. These coastal lands are therefore the ideal place for resettling the excess of the rural, and especially the native, population.

Much of this land is national property. Some adventurers have claimed ownership of them, but their titles, if they had any at all, did not stand up under judicial examination. For this reason, the nationally owned coastal lands should be used to create new population centers to be settled under the *ejido* system by the excess population from the communities of the high plateau.

This potential wealth has not of course failed to attract the attention of land speculators who, calling themselves "colonists," have sought the title to these lands for the purpose of founding small properties—but small only in appearance, for they would again fall into the hands of large landholders.

For this reason it was thought necessary to introduce into the agrarian code the provision that the national lands and whatever land is going to remain available can *only* be used to create new population centers established under the *ejido* system.

The battle against communal landownership by the natives is going on constantly, not only in Mexico, but in many Latin American countries. Speaking always in the most eloquent words of "the sacred right to private property," some people seek to destroy communal landownership. Those who propose to subdivide the communal lands are the most reactionary elements in the Latin American republics. The parties formed by the large landholders must have some sinister purpose when they pretend to protect "the Indians and the peasants, demanding that the communal system of landownership be abolished and each individual be handed his individual parcel." Only thus, it is said, could the owner of the parcel receive credit from the private institutions, and this would enable him to improve his equipment and make progress in agricultural production. But what remains unsaid is that the security for this loan would be precisely this parcel and that, if the peasant failed to pay, it would immediately be seized by the bank, put up for auction and bought by a landholder, and once again, the protection of the "sacred right to private property" would serve only to dispossess the individual of all property, forcing him into peonage on the landholder's farm.

#### FORESTRY

Another great step towards the solution of the problem of demographic pressure has been the exploitation of the forests.

Having been exiled to the mountains, the natives remained in possession of the great forests of conifers that covered them, but lack of a network of roads impeded for a long time the exploitation of these forests in a rational manner. The natives were therefore forced to subsist by destroying the trees so they could plant corn; but since the mountainous terrain with its steep slopes and scant topsoil was quickly eroded, they had to go on spreading the destruction of the forests, converting the terrain into fields and planting it with corn. Large expanses of forests were thus destroyed and, unfortunately, continue to be destroyed. The situation was aggravated during the last century by the construction of the railway network and by the use of charcoal for cooking and of firewood for industrial uses.

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The discovery of oil, its nationalization and the electrification of the country have helped to contain deforestation by furnishing a cheaper form of energy for industrial purposes and better and more economical fuels for domestic uses. But until very recently, forestry legislation, though apparently designed to conserve the forests, encouraged by its lack of clarity and great complexity the clandestine exploitation of the forests, which was carried out jointly by the lumber companies and sometimes in collusion with dishonest officials who permitted exploitation on an immoderate scale.

Only the latest forestry law stipulates that the native communities and *ejidos* who own the forests must exploit them directly, subject of course to the law, but for the sole profit of the community.

The new highway network, built in Mexico during the last 35 years, made possible a more rational exploitation of the wealth of the forests—more rational than the use of wood as charcoal or firewood. But at the same time it allowed some enterprising individuals to get rich quick by exploiting the communal forests and deceiving the natives who were at first amazed that anyone should buy up their forests, take it upon himself to fell the trees which were such a nuisance at seedtime, and in addition to all this, offer them equipment for ball games and carry their generosity so far as to give the boys who showed some interest in the sport some canvas shoes and T-shirts. For such miserable compensation, the lumberers were allowed to carry off the lumber from hundreds and thousands of acres.

Even though the new forestry legislation does contain many loopholes, it still marks a decisive step towards the protection of this source of wealth for the communities and *ejidos*. In the Tarahumara region of the Sierra de Chihuahua and in Chiapas, the National Institute for Indian Affairs (*Instituto Nacional Indigenista*) has already succeeded in organizing *ejidos* based more on silviculture than on agriculture. This will provide the communities with a major source of income and help them solve the problem of demographic pressure.

## INDUSTRY

Another way to solve the problem of increasing population density is being opened up by the great industrial development that is taking place in Mexico at this very moment, leading to the establishment of every type of industry.

These industries naturally attract the rural population from the environs because of the higher wages they can offer, and promote the creation of secondary industries and the consumption in these places of a major quantity of agricultural produce. This in turn leads to the purchase of excess produce from the native communities and creates jobs for a significant number of people, whether in local commerce or in transportation. Nevertheless, these new forms of economic organization do not enter easily into the cultural framework of the Indians, and their distrust makes them reluctant to do this kind of work.

But while big industry and the associated commerce are creating major employment opportunities for native labor, the production of popular art objects is having a more direct impact. The great variety, utility and intrinsic beauty of these objects, which are made to a large extent in the native communities, are creating more and more demand for them, and they are beginning to be used as decorative pieces in a large number of Mexican homes. The demand for folk art has increased in this way and is already beginning to form an important export item as these Mexican products are becoming known in Europe and Asia.

The recent exhibitions of Mexican art in several places in Europe and the sale of folk art in Japan and various European countries show that it is possible for the products of the native communities to be accepted as artistic objects all over the world, thus making it possible for the native communities to have an extra source of income.

## CONCLUSIONS

It may therefore be said that the native communities in Mexico now have a promising means of developing themselves without losing their essential characteristics as communities, provided

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always that means can be found to take care of the excess population—whether by colonization, exploitation of the forests or employment in industry or else by the development of small industries.

The efforts now being made by the Mexican government through the National Institute of Indian Affairs—in which are represented the departments and secretariats of state that have an interest in the development of native communities—and the purpose that animates the government—not only to defend and preserve, but to foster the harmonious growth of these communities and to effect their incorporation in Mexican society without tension or violence—all this allows us to foresee a vast development of the native communities in the future.