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Mexico has come a long way in the past three decades. She has conscientiously striven to give the people their rightful share in the republic

Adios to the Hacienda

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IN MEXICO the hacienda's last courtly bow is a feeble one, for its pompous glory has faded. In its place arises the Mexican peasant, glorified by the Revolution and again possessed of his birthright, his own arable land.

By ancient Mexican law the land belonged to him who worked it. To own a piece of land meant merely to find an idle plot, to plow your furrows and plant your corn. But the Mexican owned the *use* of the land, not the land itself.

Absolute ownership of land is an Anglo-Saxon concept as absurd to the old-time Mexican as ownership of the air or the sunshine. Land was God's free gift, not to be sold, exchanged, or mortgaged. Corn, beans, cattle—these could be bought and sold, but not land. Land was bread and bread was life. To have no land was to die.

Another wholesome principle rooted deep in Mexican tradition is that of cooperative production. The communal Indian villages, later called *ejidos*, gave the basic design to modern Mexican cooperatives. The ejido village was an expanded family unit, self-governed, with common lands and individual plots, with joint ownership of cattle and equipment, a community where, in theory at least, all worked and shared and got an even break.

But the picture was not to remain so idyllic. A rapacious Aztec royalty learned about private ownership of land. Then Cortez and his conquerors sliced into the ejidos. Finally Porfirio Diaz invited absentee capitalists to fatten their purses on the labor of the peasant.

Under Diaz, Mexico became a country of huge *haciendas* ranging from several thousand acres to vast estates, some larger than the states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island combined. By 1910, 96.9 per cent of the rural families had no land whatever. Moreover, three-fifths of the population, in addition to losing their communal lands, had become serfs living in mortal fear of a *hacendado* whose word was law.

The rich grew richer and the poor poorer. And in 1911 the inevitable wrath descended upon Porfirio Diaz.

The revolt was led by Emiliano Zapata, a man "who had known hunger," who had been forced to "step into the ditch" when the master passed. It was Zapata who charged through the haciendas and aroused the serfs to the cry of "land and liberty." It was Zapata who announced to the world that "we shall not lay down our arms

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until the ejidos of our villages are restored to us, until we are given back the lands which the hacendados stole from us during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, when justice was subject to his caprice."

Zapata's prodding finally produced the Constitution of 1917, which promised land. It flatly stated that the nation must "impose on private property such limitations as the public interest may demand"; that the lands of the great haciendas must be restored to their rightful owners.

Today one-fifth of the population has regained its land; 62,000,000 acres have been distributed, and 14,526 ejido villages, numbering 882,000 families, have been created. Since many of these villages have developed little or no communal life, they are not all true ejido villages. The ejido most interesting to us is the communal ejido and it is that we shall discuss.

THIS NEW communal ejido follows a pattern as old as recorded history, with a twist as modern as the most progressive tendencies in the United States. In the effort to adapt a traditional cultural form to an ever-changing environment, Mexico has created cooperative communities which closely adhere to the Rochdale principles of Consumer Cooperation.

The ejido worker is treated with justice. His fixed wage is based on the skill needed for his job, but he shares also in community profits, according to the number of hours he has worked, without regard for his daily wage.

Foremen, storekeepers, all responsible village officials, are democratically elected. Although the government has an overall agricultural plan to which the individual ejido must conform, there still remains a large domain for democratic community decision. Thus is forming in embryo the political and social consciousness that Mexico sadly needs for her continued development.

Vital to the ejido is the National Bank of Ejido Credit, which in due time will be owned and managed by the workers themselves. The bank advances money for the purchase of stock, machinery and improvements. It handles the transportation and sale of crops. It performs educational functions: organizes group buying and the scientific selection of machines, tools, stock and seeds; conducts agricultural schools; chooses peasants to be sent to the United States for agricultural study.

Between the more successful ejido villages and the surviving haciendas is a contrast as striking as that between the medieval and the modern. Where before was monotony and resignation there now exists an exciting community spirit. The ejido provides playgrounds, schools and hospitals; and in some cases the hacendado's formidable mansion has been converted into an agricultural school, a packing house, or perhaps a hotel to attract the tourist trade. There is a new spirit—the responsible, courageous spirit of men who are free.

What economic benefits has the ejido brought? Poverty is still the condition of the majority of Mexicans,

and the ejido worker shares this poverty. The sledding has been tough. But the reasons are clear: The Indian and his ancestors have been serfs; it takes time to walk again like free men. Vast dislocations accompany the transition to a new economy; and the World War has further complicated the agricultural picture.

Critics, and there have been many, stress that importations of beans and corn have increased under the ejido system. They fail to note, however, that while the production of these items fell slightly, national production of 13 other crops increased in the same period by 51 per cent and that communal production increased more than private. Likewise, the ejidos have cultivated more of their land than have the haciendas and have gradually increased the amount of production per acre.

This growth in productive efficiency is the logical promise of the ejido system. It comes slowly, but certain features of an enlightened government policy insure its coming. One bulwark of this policy is the manifest attitude that power should rightfully rest in those who produce the wealth of the world. Another is the government's honest effort to educate the peasantry —by furnishing technical advisors to the ejidos, by ejido schools, and by a national campaign against illiteracy.

Mexico is poor and the job is expensive and will therefore take time. But Mexico is not so poor as she once was. She has today the third largest gold reserve in Latin America. As soon as the United States again makes them available, Mexico can pay cash for modern farm implements. She can extend irrigation projects and farm credits. And these things she intends to do.

BUT reactionary elements still block the smooth working of the ejido system. The hacendados who lost their lands are not happy. Their number is negligible, but they are influential and sometimes cunning. They regard the land distribution program as extremely highhanded. In liquidating the haciendas, buildings, cattle, fruit trees, all improvements were paid for, but in many cases *not a peso* was given for the land itself.

In justice, in constitutional law, and in the deepest Mexican tradition the land belonged to the peasant who labored upon it. But perhaps direct seizure was not the most practical way to restore it to him. A land-value tax, as used in Denmark, would have accomplished the same end with less hard feeling.

A graduated land-value tax which taxes according to what land *can* produce rather than what it actually *does* produce would have made it exceedingly unprofitable for a hacienda to retain land it did not use. The peasant, in turn, could have taken any available land for his own use merely by paying the annual tax or due. Given such opportunity, he need not suffer under the whiphand of a hacendado. And the hacendado, finding fewer and fewer peasants to work his acres, would be forced to give up more and more of his bloated holdings.

There is, moreover, one serious shortcoming of the ejido system. Compared to the sterility of the hacienda, the ejido offers rich and varied forms of enterprise, but compared to the fluid system of Denmark, the ejido nourishes a relatively static economy. It is a primitive heritage, born in a simple, changeless society and cannot readily cope with shifting world demands or adjust to rapid improvements in agricultural technique.

The fixed nature of the communal village limits the kind and extent of cooperation possible. The village community is not necessarily the most advantageous unit for all forms of cooperative enterprise. In Denmark cooperatives cut across boundaries to develop along lines of mutual advantage. Thus, a farmer may have membership in a milk producers' cooperative and belong also to a truck farming cooperative that is composed of entirely different members.

In Mexico today there is a growing tendency toward individual rather than communal grants. About one-fourth of the ejido families have asked for their own private lands. Those who do go out on their own, however, will have learned from the ejido experience the advantages of cooperative enterprise. They will be able perhaps to organize a wider variety of cooperatives than is possible under the ejido system.

Mexico today can be regarded through the eye of the tourist or, more reflectively, from the attitude of the historian. The tourist will compare Mexico's shabby countenance with the grandeur of the United States. But the historian will remember the deplorable misery of 1910. He will see that Mexico has come a long way, that she has conscientiously striven to give the people their rightful share in the republic. He will see an awakened peasantry struggling in their cooperative communities to understand the complexities of life. He will understand that the ejido, drawing on the accumulated tradition of ages, is perhaps a necessary step toward a more perfect economy.

Man Is a Funny Animal

« When Lt. Col. Frank Meyers sat down to dinner at the Officers' club, the waiter brought him a knife and fork but no spoon. "This coffee," remarked the Colonel, "is going to be pretty hot to stir with my fingers." The waiter beat a hasty retreat and returned a short time later with another cup of coffee. "Maybe this isn't so hot, sir," he beamed.

« *Man's capacities have never been measured. Nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried.* THOREAU