

San Miguel

A Mexican Collective Ejido

Raymond Wilkie



SAN MIGUEL
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RAYMOND WILKIE

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*To the people of Mexico,
who have tried, by means of the collective
ejidos, to further the brotherhood
and true community of men;
and to my children, Larry, Kim, Pam, and Craig,
who I hope and believe will contribute
to the same goal*

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R.W.

Introduction

The Mexican Revolution of 1910–21 was so clearly a struggle for political democracy and land reform that every presidential administration since has made at least token efforts to carry forward its goals, as defined by the Constitution of 1917. Although many Mexicans feel that the impetus of the Revolution has slowed, or stopped altogether, Mexico is a leader among Latin American nations, both in its land reform programs and in its attainment of a stable and democratic government.

Political stability has been achieved through the development of a powerful political party, the Party of Revolutionary Institutions (PRI), which has managed to incorporate most of its potential rivals. Political democracy has not fared quite as well; but all major interest groups are represented in the PRI, with the exception of the army and certain large financial and industrial corporations, which effectively exert their influence in other ways.

Land distribution, one of the major goals of the Revolution, has been accomplished in two ways: by ejido grants to individuals and by ejido grants to communities. Until 1934 all the ejido grants to communities were worked individually; they were usually used for subsistence crops, primarily corn and beans, and were associated with a very low degree of capitalization and productivity.

The Cárdenas administration of 1934–40 created a new kind of ejido grant, with land to be held and worked cooperatively. By this means the government sought to institute modern agricultural

methods and to avoid the disadvantages of distributing land in very small parcels to peasants lacking both capital and technical knowledge. Over 300 of these collective communities were established in the Laguna region of Coahuila and Durango alone, and about the same number were set up in five other areas of Mexico. By 1953, when I first undertook this study, this immense social experiment had been in operation for almost two decades.

The ejidos are the core of Mexico's land reform program and a major factor in its political and economic stability. Yet in spite of their importance to Mexico and their potential importance as a model for other countries, there are remarkably few studies of their success as economic organizations. Even fewer studies have been concerned with the effects of the ejido economy on the non-economic aspects of community life.

Of the more than 20 anthropological and sociological studies of Mexican communities published between 1925 and 1953, the only one that presents a detailed description and analysis of the economic system is Oscar Lewis's *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (1951). Lewis's conclusions about the ejido economy in Tepoztlán sum up and are consistent with the findings of anthropologists, sociologists, and Mexican agriculture officials regarding the individual ejido grant. Of Tepoztlán's ejido economy he writes: "The ejido has not really solved the land problem . . . due in part to the small amount of land that could be distributed" (p. 128). It is his conclusion that one of the crucial problems is the rapid population increase with no accompanying increase in resources or improvement in production techniques. In his words, there has been "a return to a more primitive type of production (hoe culture on the hills and scrub forest) in an effort to escape the devastating effects of a money economy during a period of inflation" (pp. 9, 157).

Apart from Lewis's study and despite the uniqueness of the ejido experiment as a source of data for social scientists interested in the process of planned change in underdeveloped countries, I found that virtually nothing had been written on developments after 1940, and nowhere was there an anthropological case study

of a single ejido collective community, though Nathan Whetten's *Rural Mexico* (1948), and Clarence Senior's *Land Reform and Democracy in Mexico* (then an unpublished manuscript) contained excellent general descriptions of the Laguna region's collective ejido system.

Intensive case studies of specific collective ejido communities are vitally needed to supplement the picture provided by regional and national statistics, which do not necessarily give an accurate picture of the economic life of individuals or communities. Nor is the quality of life in its noneconomic aspects at all clear from such data. For example, in the decade immediately preceding the Mexican Revolution, the vast majority of rural Mexicans had neither economic nor political rights; in fact, some were still held in virtual slavery. Yet most economists of the period, foreign and Mexican alike, described Mexico as economically prosperous. This description was based on gross national indices of production, commerce, construction, and income, indices that ignored the life of most of the people.

To note the misuse of large-scale national statistics is not to deny their usefulness, but it does point to the need for interpreting such data in combination with qualitative studies of individuals and communities, prepared by a social scientist who lives with the people he is studying, who participates in their community activities, and who shares for a while their hopes and joys, their work and frustrations. With such personal and immediate experiences for reference, national and regional statistics take on a very different meaning. It was with this in mind that I undertook to describe the changing economy and social organization of a single collective ejido community.

Because the Laguna cotton region of northcentral Mexico was the first collective ejido area established, and also the largest and most economically important one, I chose it for my study. Of the 300-odd collective communities in the area, I selected the ejido of San Miguel because it was in the middle range in total population (1,200), in area of cropland (four hectares per *ejidatario*), in the number of charter ejido members (150), and in degree of mechani-

zation. I also chose San Miguel because, in the drought year of 1953, when many ejidos were plunged into economic crisis, its six wells and its canals, which connected with both the Nazas River and the Aguanaval River, provided an assured water supply. I soon realized that San Miguel was not as "typical" as I had thought. In fact, it was one of the most successful and important ejidos in the Laguna region, famous not only for its economic advances but also for its role in the Central Union of Collective Ejidos. President Cárdenas had visited the ejido twice, the noted artist Diego Rivera once; its officials went often to Mexico City to plead the cause of the Laguna ejidos with high government officials. Still, what information may be lost because San Miguel proved to be not completely "typical" is more than compensated for by the fact that its life has been so closely related to key decisions and decision-makers at the regional and national level.

The people of San Miguel, like the majority of Mexico's rural population, are farmers and rural workers. They are socially, economically, and politically marginal to the larger urban society. But there is a significant difference between the rural proletariat of the Laguna region and the peasants who constitute the population of most of rural Mexico. The collective ejido communities are highly capitalized, cash-crop businesses. They represent Mexico's major effort to meet the immediate economic needs of the rural population and at the same time increase agricultural productivity by the application of knowledge and techniques that require capital and efficient organization.

Critics of the collective ejidos contend that the government has merely replaced the hacienda owners, that the ejidatario is no better off than the hacienda peon, and that agricultural production has suffered as a result of the government's bureaucratic inefficiency. Since 1940 these critics have been influential in the federal government, which has considered the collectives more a problem than a solution. The creation of new collectives has ceased, and those already established have received only grudging support from the government. Indeed, the government has provided more and more assistance to the private farms (*pequeños*

propiedades), which are consequently able to institute the kind of intensive farming methods that lead to increased productivity.

The struggle between the rural workers and the private estates has thus taken a new turn in this century. Although the rural workers now have half the land, they do not have the financial resources, knowledge, and organization to compete effectively in the world market. The individual and communal ejidos continue to operate at the subsistence level; the collective ejidos are dependent on the government for any successes they have in the world market. The competition between the private landowners and the twentieth-century descendants of the Indian peons is now not primarily for soil, but for the resources that must be added to the soil to make it productive. This study of a collective ejido is a description of that struggle.

For five months in 1953 I lived in the household of Nicolás Robles, one of the younger members of the ejido. Besides Nicolás himself, the household was made up of his wife, his four children, his non-ejidatario cousin, and the cousin's wife and child.

Nicolás was my own age, 27, and since I too had four young children, I readily identified with him. During my stay in San Miguel, I visited in every household, interviewing and observing, but it was the Robles family that I became a part of, and on whom I relied for subjective validation of generalizations about San Miguel and other collective ejidos. The processes and trends in the collective ejido communities of the Laguna region and in the larger Mexican society became specific and real to me through my personal experiences in the Robles household; each of the community characteristics and processes I describe in the following pages has its counterpart in the lives of Nicolás and his family.

My hypothesis when I went to the Laguna region in 1953 was that the community-owned and -operated ejidos, if economically successful, would result in a more cohesive and stronger community organization. I anticipated that the educational, social, and legal systems would function more effectively than they had when the community was part of a privately owned cotton plan-

tation. I hypothesized also that individual families would be strengthened as a result of their increased and stabilized incomes. These hypotheses were confirmed by observations, interviews, and statistical data collected in 1953, 17 years after the ejido was established.

I also found three major developments that I had not anticipated: an increased variation in income and living standards among the ejidatarios; a marked population increase; and the individualization, or decollectivization, of important aspects of the economy, including property rights, work methods, and income. In addition, I found that the formal ejido organization provided little flexibility for the growing population of non-ejidatarios and scant opportunity for them to fit into the economic structure. Nor was there enough work outside the community to accommodate the growing population.

On returning to San Miguel in 1966 and 1967, I discovered that these trends had continued, and that, in addition, the ejido had split into two conflicting political and economic groups. Similar divisions and conflicts had already occurred in many less successful ejidos since 1940. Indeed, in some cases the Ejido Bank had encouraged these divisions, and had lent money only to those ejido sectors it considered good financial risks. In some ejidos conflict grew out of a struggle between the labor agency of the government, the Confederación Nacional de Campesinos (CNC), and the nongovernment, pro-Communist organization, the Central Union of Collective Ejidos. The conflict was also caused in part by economic problems arising in the doubling or tripling of the ejido populations and the inflexibility of government regulations that prevented the adjustments and transfer of ejido rights necessary to accommodate the growing non-ejidatario population. Recently, there have been some indications that the Mexican government may, in the future, give more guidance and support to the collective ejido communities than has been the case to this point.

The data for this study were obtained from my own observations in 1953, 1966, and 1967, from historical records, and from inter-

views with residents who lived in San Miguel (some in the early 1900's) when it was a hacienda. The historical and geographical background of the land reform of 1936, in which the collective ejidos were created, is described in the first chapter. Following that is a description of San Miguel from 1936 to 1953, covering economic, political, religious, educational, leisure, and kinship aspects of community; and a chapter on San Miguel from 1953 to the present. My major focus in this description is on the ways the ejido community has been modified by demographic and economic changes. In the last two chapters I summarize the studies of other Mexican collective ejidos and discuss the alternative paths that are open to the federal government—and to the ejidos themselves.

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R W

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Part I

San Miguel to 1953

