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THE LAND PROBLEM IN MEXICO

BY LEBBEUS R. WILFLEY

THE general impression which prevails in the United States that an agrarian question lies at the basis of the present revolution in Mexico, is not supported by the facts, as an investigation of the situation will show. In the first place, there is no general agrarian question in Mexico. Oppression in Mexico is general and there are abuses which are universal; but this is not true, with one exception which will be mentioned later, of those abuses arising out of the administration of landed estates. The land question is local, and differs in different localities. It is serious in only one state—Morelos.

There can be no general land question in Mexico, for two reasons: First, because the Indian does not want land, and second, if he did want it, it exists in great abundance for all. Only about fifteen million people, the majority of whom are Indians, live in Mexico, which is a country of over 800,000 square miles, or 500,000,000 acres. The fact that the Indians do not want land has been demonstrated many times and in various ways. It was demonstrated conclusively on a national scale by Benito Juarez, the great author of the Reform Laws of 1857-59 and the hero of the Mexican people. This was done in the following manner: Under the Spanish régime the Indians dwelt in villages (as they do now) and were given the free enjoyment and use in common of all lands adjacent to the villages. The village proper was a rectangular plot of ground twelve hundred yards square, with a church in the center. This was called the *Fundo Legal*. Surrounding this was a body of ground called *Egidos*, where the villagers raised their crops. Beyond this were the Communal Lands, which corresponded to the town common of English and New England towns. Here the

Indians grazed and watered their cattle and gathered their wood and charcoal.

When the liberal party triumphed under the leadership of Benito Juarez, the Government not only nationalized all the property of the Church dedicated to the use of public worship, education, etc., but it confiscated many valuable *haciendas* in various parts of the Republic owned by the Clergy. These *haciendas* were sold to the friends of the liberal party. At the same time, this Reform Law of 1859 provided that the public lands surrounding the villages should be divided among the Indians and that the head of each family should receive title to his quota in his own name. This was done. The theory was that the Indian should no longer be treated as a child and a ward of the nation, but as a responsible citizen. On the same theory and at the same time, the Mexican Constitution, which is modeled after the United States Constitution, was given to the Mexican people. The net result of this law of reform was that the Indian lost his lands.

It happened in this way: The neighboring *haciendado* immediately began acquiring title to the small Indian farms around the villages. In those states where the rich lands were scarce, as was the case in Morelos, this process was carried on until the big land owners had acquired all the lands up to the edge of the towns, leaving the Indians with only their shacks in the villages. This was easily done. The new purchasers of the confiscated *haciendas* were mainly Spaniards. The Spaniard always wielded a powerful influence with the officials of both the Government and of the church.

Those things which cause people to become attached to the soil in Northern countries do not exist in Mexico. The soil is rich, the climate is salubrious, and the wants of the peon are few, hence the value of the private ownership of land does not appeal to him. He was therefore easily induced to part with his lands, and under all the circumstances it would have been miraculous if he had received fair compensation for his holdings. The operation of the above mentioned law is better illustrated in Morelos than in any other state, for the reason that there the soil is rich and scarce, and well adapted to the cultivation of sugar. In the states where land is plentiful and poor the Indians still hold their lands.

Since this nation-wide experiment of Benito Juarez, a number of experiments have been made by governors of dif-

ferent states, and always with the same results. On two occasions, for example, the governors of the State of Zacatecas divided large tracts of lands among the peons. They held them for a few years only. In too many cases the land was mortgaged and sold to get money with which to dissipate.

No, the Indian does not want land. What he wants is permanent employment at a reasonable wage. He wants to live in comfort without the anxiety and labor which are incident to the successful management of landed estates. This trait of the Indian character is well illustrated by the fact that a great majority of the race prefer to dwell on the tablelands which occupy the central part of the Republic, where the climate is cool, the land poor and dear, and water scarce, rather than to live in the low lands along the coast, where the climate is hot, the soil rich and cheap, and water plentiful. The trait of the Indian character which causes him to do this is the key to the proper understanding of the land problem in Mexico.

In fact, there can be no full comprehension of the so-called "land problem" without an understanding of the character of the Mexican peon. The great problem in Mexico is not the *land* question, but the *Indian* question.

The general impression which exists in the United States, that Mexico is a Latin country, is a mistake. President Diaz estimated that in ninety per cent of the Mexican population Indian blood predominated, and that considerably over fifty per cent of the population was of pure Indian blood. In this fact we have the A B C of a correct understanding of the Mexican situation; and the X Y Z of it lies in the knowledge of the fact that the Mexican Indian is similar to the North American Indian with whom we are familiar, except in two respects. The North American Indian was a nomad, and a warrior; while the Mexican Indian is attached to his village, and is a pacific individual. Otherwise they have the same characteristics: they are treacherous, revengeful, cruel, lazy, opposed to modern civilization, lacking in initiative, in the power of forecast, in self-restraint, and are devoid of interest in the general welfare of the community. (Of course there are exceptions to the rule. There are some exceedingly clever Indians, and, with opportunity, this class would undoubtedly come to the front.) The real problem in Mexico is the problem of the races. With ten per cent of the popula-

tion Caucasian and ninety per cent Indian, how is it possible for a constitution and a body of laws to be evolved and adopted by the two races which would be applicable to both? The proposition is an absurdity. The preponderance of Indian blood in the population of the country constitutes the great fundamental problem which embraces and overshadows all others in Mexico. It is the basis of all revolutions, for the reason that revolutions such as usually occur in Mexico could not take place except in a community where the masses of the people are in ignorance. It makes real democracy in Mexico impossible, and it gives rise to all of those problems which are now vexing that unfortunate country, and the solution of which is fraught with so much difficulty.

The fact is that the real land problem in Mexico is *not more land for the people, but more people for the land*. It is well known that in many of the states the people are actually "land poor."

Much has been said and written about a few great estates in Mexico, like the Terrazas estate in Chihuahua, which are pointed out as types illustrative of the general situation. This is misleading. There are several large estates in the country, parts of which have been acquired by unfair and illegitimate methods, but they are the exception and not the rule, and are not sufficiently numerous to give rise to a general agrarian problem.

Two further facts which have important bearing on the Mexican land question should not be overlooked. In the first place, most of these large tracts of land are without water, and must be irrigated to be made productive. In the second place, by the nature of the case, the cultivation of sugar must be done on a large scale to make it profitable. This is so all over the world. These two facts render the operation and ownership of small tracts of land difficult and unprofitable by individual owners.

It will thus be seen that the land problem in Mexico exists in a few localities only, and that abuses arising in connection with it are in no sense general. Strictly speaking, it exists only in one locality: in the State of Morelos.

LEBBEUS R. WILFLEY.