To what extent and why did the Ejidal land system fail at achieving agrarian reform in Mexico?

Student AAAA
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Mr. Blackmon
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Abstract

The focus of this research is to examine why the ejidal land system failed at achieving the goals of the Mexican Agrarian Revolution. The history of Mexico has been marked by revolution and unrest. In 1910, when the Mexican Agrarian Revolution broke out, political and social unrest had been seething throughout the country.

From the War of Independence in 1821, the lands of the *ejidatarios*, those who held village lands in common, had been taken away from them on the basis of establishing an industrial economy. This method of trying to modernize the economy was heightened during the Porfirio Diaz government, which consistently favored large landowners at the expense of the impoverished, landless peasants. When dissatisfied political elites finally ousted Diaz in 1911, the Agrarian Reform began, hoping to forever revolutionize the agricultural system.

In order to achieve the goals of the revolution, the ejidal land system of pre-Columbian times was reinstated. However, the system failed at achieving these goals due to ineffective leadership that had conflicting ideological, legal, and economic interests with that of the general idea of the ejidos.

This research concludes that these conflicting interests failed at establishing an effective ejido system able to achieve agrarian reform because ideologically those who came into power prioritized economic development over social development, legally the support given to the ejidatarios was not sufficient for them to take full ownership of their lands, and economically because they did not receive enough support to rise out of poverty and become self-sufficient.

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**Introduction**

Ejidal land is at present the main source of rural land for Mexico City's expansion. The restriction attached to the property rights of this land conflict with the cities' growth needs (Cymet 11). Although these lands have been protected under law since the Constitution of 1917, modern legislation has begun to dismantle these protections. In November 1991, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari announced his intention of rewriting Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which defined the nature of ejido property (Dewalt 1). In this new revision, the government declared an end to the redistribution of land, granted ejidatarios the legal right to sell, rent, sharecrop, or mortgage their land, and gave them the ability to enter into joint ventures and contracts with private entrepreneurs. The net effect of these changes was to "privatize" ejido landholdings (2). The ejidos in the urban peripheries have thus been rapidly losing their land without any tangible benefit to them (Cymet 12). With their origins in pre-Columbian times, one must wonder how such a deeply rooted part in Mexican history can be disappearing. With the peasants' ardent calls for Land and Liberty, it seemed as if the Mexican Agrarian Reform would have been the answer to their calls by reinstating the lands to them. However, as can be seen from the current state of ejidal lands, the reform was not successful in its attempts. In order to understand the reform's failure, one must first understand the origins of the ejidos and what they are, as well as what brought about the Mexican Revolution. Through this background, one can then see how the government did not implement the essence of the ejido system because of ineffective leadership that had conflicting ideological, legal, and economic interests with the general idea of the ejidos.
Origins of the Ejidos

The ejido institution in general has an ancient history which goes back to preColumbian times, when the Indian villages were the collective owners of their lands. The indigenous land system was closely interrelated with the social organization of the Indians (Tannenbaum 3). They were found organized as tribes and divided into kinship groups known as Calpulli (3). Several of these groups united to form villages. In each kinship group, plots were held by the heads of families with permanent tenure and inheritance. These plots were inalienable and transferred only if they were not being tilled (3). The Spanish crown gave recognition for the first time to the right of the Indian villages to own land in a decree by Carlos V in 1533, which stated that land being distributed to the conquistadores was not to be taken from those held by Indian villages (Cymet 101). In further decrees signed by King Felipe, the lands of the Indian villages were declared to be inalienable, inextinguishable, and unmortgageable, almost identical to the legal claims to be make later during the Agrarian reform (the reform made it clear that ejidal land was different from private property by being legally non-marketable and nontransferable). The land belonged in a corporate manner to each village community, not to its individual members (102). The term ejido refers to the system whereby villages hold lands in common, with ownership rights devolving upon the population center (Cole 21). A symbiotic relationship was established between the haciendas, the large landholding estates which were granted as private property to the conquistadores, and the ejido. The haciendas, although selfsufficient in almost everything, badly needed the labor that the villages provided. Thus, although the history of the colonial period is plagued by conflicts over property limits between the Indian villages and the neighboring haciendas, the Indian villages managed to retain collective property.
rights on much of their land throughout the colonial period under the Spanish crown (Cymet 104).

**Independent Mexico**

Even before the Porfirio Diaz government that prompted the Mexican Agrarian Revolution, the ejidal lands were already being diminished. The centuries-old institution of communal farming, already in a state of decadence due to the encroachments of large landholders, was further reduced in the hope of making independent farmers out of Indians who had no conception of the meaning of private property (Priestley 20). The liberals in Mexico adopted in their political platform, (shortly after the Mexican War of Independence in 1821), the goal of ending corporate landholdings held by the church and the villages communities, as a means to opening them up to commercial development (Cymet 104). The major onslaught on communal village property took place when the liberal faction finally came into power in the middle of the nineteenth century. After the last conservative government of Antonio Lopez de Santa Ana was ousted by the liberals in 1855, they finally made privatization of corporate property into national law on June 25, 1856 (104). President Juan Alvarez, backed by Finance Minister Miguel Lerdo de Tejada and Justice Minister Benito Juarez, adopted the Ley Lerdo (104). This law abolished nationally the property rights of all corporate organizations such as the church or the village communities, and recognized only physical individuals as being legally capable of holding title to property. Some months later, on February 5, 1857, the Lerdo Law became part of the Mexican Constitution (104). Although these legal decrees stressed economic liberalism and free enterprise with the goal of creating an enterprising rural middle class, it actually led in the days of the Porfirio Diaz government.
Porfirio Diaz Administration

The unintended result of the liberals' efforts was not a rural middle-class, but a monopolization of the land by the haciendas and polarization at the extremes: a small class of wealthy haciendas versus large masses of virtual serfs (Cymet 107). The Diaz regime forcibly supported the wealthy against the peasantry (Cole 15). The Diaz government was occupied in laying down the basis of a modern capitalist industrial economy. Over two million acres of communal land belonging to the villages were privatized during this period, which ended up in the hands of estate owners or of land companies (Cymet 108). Privatization on the basis of the Lerdo Law became often an excuse for confiscation. The reorientation, however, of the agricultural sector towards commercial export production was ironically one of the major factors that brought about the ruin of the Porfirian political system. Mexico, an agricultural country, had to import grain to feed its population, pushing the peasants toward starvation (109). Thus, out of the poverty and misery of the masses, the seeds of the revolution were nurtured (Priestley 30). Political elites dissatisfied with the Diaz regime began to plot the overthrow of his government. Demands for greater democracy kept together the political and economic elites which brought to power Francisco I. Madero (Cymet 109). When Diaz was finally ousted in 1911, it did not take too long to realize that the agrarian problem would not allow the country to regain its peace, thus ushering in the first, crucial period of the agrarian reform.

Venustiano Carranza

Despite the revolutionary fervor present during the start of the revolution, it was not until 17 years after the cessation of fighting that substantial steps were taken to redistribute land. Lack of a unifying social and economic doctrine made itself felt, and the diversity of political thought
made it difficult to initiate or formulate a program (Cole 20). While the conservative position maintained that the hacienda worker should be granted a subsistence plot with which he could supplement his daily wage, the second proposal, growing out of the demands of the Indian elements in Mexican society, wanted to revert to traditional ways and provide villages with communal lands (Cole 21). With Francisco I. Madero's assassination on February 22, 1913, Venustiano Carranza emerged as the new leader with an agrarian reform program to win peasant support (Cymet 112). With Carranza's reign began the legal foundations for which the agrarian reform would begin. His first step in politically founding the reform was in his publication of a decree on January 6, 1915. In this decree, the specific provisions for restoring land to villages stated, first, that all alienation of village lands, forests, and waters affected by the misapplication of the law of June 26, 1856, were null and void (Simpson 57). The decree of 1915 as an instrument for dealing with the agrarian reform, however, left much to be desired. Firstly, it only addressed giving land to villages. Furthermore, it was not a strong address because the emphasis on the decree was on the restoration of village lands, not the donation or outright grants of land to villages in need (58). It is then obvious that the authors of the decree contemplated that only a few cases in which villages in need would want a donation or outright grant would arise. In short, the decree of 1915 was primarily a "negative" program, a procedure for righting past wrongs, and not a "positive" attempt to face the land problem as a whole and reestablish it as a permanent part of society (58). Secondly, only certain types of villages could petition for land, namely, those which had political status. This automatically ruled out practically all of the settlements of resident hacienda laborers, at the time forming a very large part of the agricultural villages in the Republic (58). Perhaps one of the most significant problems with the decree affecting the ejidos
was that the decree, both in its language and in its spirit, definitely put the emphasis upon the individual and not upon the village or group in its corporate capacity. That it was not the ejido as a communal unit which the framers of the law wished to reconstruct is clearly shown in the preamble: "...it must be noted that proprietorship to the land will not be rested in the pueblo in its corporate capacity but will be parceled out in full dominion [to the inhabitants]..." (Simpson 60). Moreover, the decree placed the burden of initiative on the villages and not the government. The villages in need of land would have had to petition for it themselves and support their petitions by proof of necessity (60). However, in a country where an overwhelming percentage of the rural population was illiterate, where the majority of the villages were isolated and cut off from access to any convenient means of communication and transportation, and where intimidation on the part of landowners likely to be affected by ejido grants was difficult to control, the requiring of the villages to take the initiative in petitioning for land not only opened the door to a variety of abuses, but meant that many villages would never receive land (60). In effect, the decree of 1915 was only a partial solution to the agrarian problem. The decree must be considered as an emergency measure dictated by political expediency in the fight which Carranza was waging in order to dominate the military and political situation existing throughout the Republic and within his own party (Priestley 45). Carranza only issued the Decree of January 6, 1915 in order to pacify the country and establish his own dictatorship with the support of the privileged classes (45).

Carranza's second bid for the support of the people and his second campaign to consolidate revolutionary sentiment was issued in 1916, calling for a convention to reform the Mexican Constitution of 1857. The result of its labors was the Mexican Constitution of 1917
Carranza himself had prepared a mild conservative document with the emphasis on political rather than on social and economic reform (Priestley 48). Carranza originally had no intention of introducing into the fundamental law of the land any of the radical social and economic doctrines that came to distinguish the new constitution (Simpson 62). However, as in the case of the decree of 1915, Carranza found himself caught up in a political and social sentiment that could not be resisted (62). The radical doctrines in the 1917 Constitution are seen in concentrated form in Article 27. Article 27 generally undertook to do three things, first to define and limit the nature of property, second to define the persons and other legal entities having the right to hold property, and finally to devise a set of principles and a procedure for the solution to the agrarian problem (65). What the authors of Article 27 were struggling towards was a functional concept of property rights. They tried to maintain that property rights are a kind of unlimited original endowment that is contingent upon its use in ways which are subordinate to the public interest (72). Although the Article 27 in the extremely wide powers which it granted to the Nation "to impose on private property such limitations as the public interest may demand," it still allowed for the development of almost any conceivable system of landholding, particularly private property (73). Thus, although Article 27 strove to radically socialize the nature of property, private property was still the ultimate goal. Unfortunately, the mere drafting of a new constitution did not solve the agrarian question. In 1921, more than half the private lands in the Republic were held by 2,700 persons and these properties represented a third of the value of all privately owned lands (Priestley 53). That ideology, down in the Constitution of 1917, even in its most radical aspects, was the work of a rising urban middle class which sought to protect the great peasant masses and the growing worker groups while respecting and augmenting the
capitalist structure (Navarro 169).

**General Alvaro Obregon**

However inconsistent the constitution and decree were in their claims, they still approved the right of villages to hold land collectively. It is clearly shown, however, that the fathers of the constitution did not set out to establish a form of land tenure in opposition to private property. Rather, they saw themselves as simply recognizing the social necessity of giving legal status to the only kind of property familiar and comprehensible to a rather backward section of the population (Simpson 73). How then, were the ejido to thrive as a self-sufficient community if they were only meant to be temporary expedients over which certain groups were to pass to private property? With the future looking bleak as a result of these vague and ineffectual legal decrees, the land reform that had aroused such high hopes seemed to have died and the people were disillusioned and disheartened (80). This disillusionment, during the Carranza regime, resulted in General Alvaro Obregon and the Sonora group declaring themselves in rebellion, with the announced intention of defending the principles of the true revolutionary movement. In less than eight months, the "revindicating revolution" resulted in Carranza's murder and the placement of Obregon to the president's chair (81). On December 28, 1920, Obregon signed the law known as the "Ley de Ejidos." This law was notable chiefly for the confusion of its concepts, the vagueness of its language, and its general incompleteness (81). Like the previous attempts at establishing a comprehensive agrarian reform, it complicated the legal formalities such as the distribution of land to villages to such an extent that not even the agrarian authorities could discover what they were supposed to do, and the poor peasants who attempted to get land for themselves found it nearly impossible with all the legal formalities they first had to go through
(81). Under Obregon's leadership, Mexico lost its revolutionary fervor with the result of almost nineteen years after the promulgation of the decree of 1915, the ownership of the land still largely concentrated in the hands of the privileged few (88).

**Plutarco Elias Calles**

In the year 1930 there was an obvious change in the attitude toward the agrarian problem. In the latter part of December 1929, ex-president Plutarco Elias Calles had just returned from a trip to Europe. Apparently, this trip made him think: Wasn't Mexico by destroying the large estates and splitting up the land in a lot of little ejido parcels headed for the same difficulties in which France found herself with her over division of the land and her little peasant proprietors unable to take advantage of modern machine methods of agricultural exploitation (Simpson 113)? After Calles voiced these new found beliefs, Chambers of Commerce, agricultural associations, and other interested bodies repeated him saying that the ejido was a failure and that only drastic curtailment of the ejido program could save the country from ruin (114).

**Ortiz Rubio**

These new forming ideas gave the incoming president, Ortiz Rubio, just what he needed to justify the policies he would begin to enforce. Ortiz Rubio possessed only a vague conception of the meaning of the agrarian reform and little or no understanding of the role of the ejido in the reform. For Rubio, the ejido was a form of land tenure to be left behind as soon as the ejidatarios could be educated to an appreciation of the virtues of private property, much like the ideology of his predecessors (112). He thus instituted the Stop Laws of 1930 and 1931, in which after a sixty day period, Rubio declared that "the State Agrarian Commission will be dissolved, thus bringing to an end the problem of the restitution and dotation of lands" (117). Although his statement was
meant for the state of Aguacalientes, in the course of the next year and a half similar presidential resolutions were signed for the states of Tlaxcala, San Luis Potosi, Coahuila, Zacatecas, and Queretaro (118). The effect of Ortiz Rubio's agrarian policy on the statistics of ejido distribution was immediate and marked. From the high peak of 1929 when 692 villages received land totaling more than a million hectares the number dropped in 1932 to 208 villages and 348,401 hectares (Simpson 118).

**Lazaro Cardenas**

Although Calles had thought of bringing an end to the establishment of more ejidos, the Depression in the 1930s changed the political atmosphere of Mexico. Carranza lost control to the radical "agraristas" in the revolutionary coalition (Cymet 125). The radicals perceived that time as a unique opportunity for dismantling the haciendas and creating more ejidos. With the nomination of Lazaro Cardenas in 1933, the second period of agrarian reform (1933-1940) began (125). Cardenas surpassed any of his predecessors in his efforts to achieve the primary objectives of the Revolution (Navarro 165). To a large degree, he succeeded; his popular government divided much of the land and infused Mexican labor with a new sense of purpose (Michaels 199). Cardenas introduced an important innovation in the ejido system which was intimately linked with his plans for a new economic role for the ejidos as commercial food producers, creating at the side of parcelized ejidos, those divided up among the individuals and workers as private plots, the collective ejidos, those worked in common (Cymet 126). However, although Cardenas saw the collective ejido as more efficient in an economic sense, he neither attempted to eliminate nor restrict parcelized ejidos, which remained the dominant form. The collective ejidos he had tried to create were allowed to return to a parcelized organization, which almost all of
them had done by the end of the Cardenas period (127). Although Cardenas increased the amount of land given to ejidatarios, this did not necessarily mean that he was allowing them to function as an ejido community. The leadership of the ejidos was turned into an instrument for controlling political demand-making and for mobilizing regime support in the rural areas (127128). The ejidos were made highly dependent on the favors of the regime. They became permanently tied to it by the credits, markets, extension services, infrastructure, and inputs that the government could provide (Cymet 128). Without these resources most ejidos were barely able to subsist.

**Manuel Avila Camacho**

By the end of the Cardenas presidency, the third period of agrarian reform began marked by the start of World War II. The developments in the Mexican economy that took place as a result of the new international situation enhanced the economic role of the commercial private farms and de-emphasized the role of ejidos, most of which remained subsistence oriented (129). There was a feeling among the revolutionary hierarchy that the pace of change was too swift and drastic and that a period of regrouping and consolidation was needed (Cole 25). Ways were then sought to raise agricultural production by imbuing a sense of security and confidence in the private agricultural producers. A new Agrarian Code was adopted in 1942 by President Manuel Avila Camacho, granting certificates of immunity against further expropriation to private landholdings (Cymet 129). Camacho favored this because he was a soldier who stressed the importance of economic improvement over social improvement (Michaels 200). Thus, the almost total disappearance of the collective ejido characterizes the third period. Not only did the creation of new collective ejidos cease almost completely, but most of them that were established during the Cardenas period reverted to parcelized organization (Cymet 131). Although the principle of
individual tenure rights remained a basic tenet of the agrarian legislation, only a minority of the ejidatarios actually received these titles over time. The ejidatarios had to struggle to obtain these titles with the agrarian bureaucracy, at enormous cost to themselves in time, energy, and money (132).

**Luis Echeverria Alvarez**

The fourth period of the agrarian reform began with the presidency of Luis Echeverria Alvarez in 1970. In this time, the government faced the problem of maintaining agricultural production for export to generate foreign currency vital to the Mexican economy. In response to the crisis, renewed emphasis was again given to the ejido institution similar to what Cardenas had done during the depression (Cymet 133-134). The collective ejido was once again given high priority in government policy. An incentive was even offered to the parcelized ejidos to turn to collective organization with the new Law of Rural Credit that established preferential interest rates for the collective ejidos (134). Although the Ministry even attempted to educate the ejidatarios to the virtues of collectivization, the campaign found no resonance among the peasants. The enthusiasm that existed in the days of Cardenas for the collective ejido had vanished among the ejidatarios, who did not respond to the renewed collectivism (134). Because of their unwillingness to cooperate with his relentless drive for this particular form of public sector economic expansion, Echeverria decided to generate profits for the public sector by expropriating ejido land for these profitable purposes (135). The government justified these expropriations to the ejidatarios as a practical way of generating new employment opportunities for them in the tourism industry. The government moved rapidly on this endeavor and pressure was put on the ejidatarios on many of their attractive lands to agree to the expropriation of them
(135). The Echeverria administration also set the course of the ejidos throughout the eighties. The question concerning the legitimacy of expropriating ejido land for urban development in general and for establishment of land reserves was finally settled in the 1984 amendments (136). In these amendments, the urban development plans were declared to be on the basis on which expropriations would take place. The community could choose between relocation to another rural site in the country of similar agricultural quality or token compensation if they decided to stay in the city, thus practically eliminating the security they had once received (136-137).

**Conclusion**

In modern times, the ejido maintains the same title that it has for centuries. However, the essence of its original nature has ceased to exist as it was envisioned to be in the agrarian reform. The ineffectual implementation of the ejidal lands as an instrument for the agrarian reform failed ultimately when the commercialization of agriculture began to dominate ejido lands. In the government's dealings with the reinstitution of ejidal lands, they did not realize the potential of the ejido system because ideologically those who came into power prioritized economic development over social development, legally the support given to the ejidatarios was not sufficient for them to take full ownership of their lands, and economically because they did not receive enough support to rise out of poverty.


