

## The Restoration of the Ejido

Luis Cabrera

*Emiliano Zapata was not alone in his criticism of Madero's handling of the agrarian issue. Some criticism came from within the ranks of the government itself. Luis Cabrera (1876–1954) was arguably the most important ideologue of the Mexican revolution. He had a distinguished career as a lawyer, schoolteacher, professor, and journalist in the years prior to the outbreak of the revolution. He backed the candidacy of Francisco I. Madero in 1910 and was elected a federal deputy in 1912. In the Chamber of Deputies, he headed the Bloque Renovador, a group of progressive legislators who pressured Madero to approach social reform more decisively. His most famous pronouncement on the issue came in the speech excerpted below, delivered to congress in 1912. Cabrera would go on to become a prominent figure in the government of Venustiano Carranza, during a period when violent factionalism was rampant. As Carranza's treasury secretary, he authored the Law of January 6, 1915, the regime's key initiative on agrarian reform, which would largely be incorporated into the Constitution of 1917. When Carranza was overthrown and assassinated in 1920, Cabrera's influence waned drastically and he grew increasingly conservative. Nevertheless, his advocacy of distributing ejidos (common lands) to the villages as a means of satisfying their needs while attacking the inefficient latifundista system would be of enduring significance: the government of Lázaro Cárdenas, which during the 1930s carried out one of the most ambitious agrarian reforms in Latin American history, did not view the distribution of ejidos as an urgent expedient of war but as an end in itself. Thus, the ejido—which was ultimately an ambiguous concept of property involving state ownership of the land and communal usufruct by the villages—became a cornerstone of Mexican agriculture until the neoliberal “reform” of the agrarian reform in 1992.*

While considering the presentation of this Project to the House of Deputies, I made sure to ascertain [President Madero's] opinion, in the hope of finding a disposition favorable to these reforms. I must state frankly that I did not find such a disposition on the President's part. He believes, rightly or wrongly, that the work of reestablishing peace must take precedence over economic reforms that, in his view, will cause further disruptions. I disagree. In my own view,

the restoration of peace should be brought about by preventive and repressive measures, but also by economic reforms that will bring conflicting social groups into a relative state of equilibrium. One of these economic measures that may help to restore peace is the restoration of the *ejidos*. . . .

DON FRANCISCO I. MADERO, in the San Luis Plan, noted that the demand for land was the cause of political unrest and promised to remedy this problem. . . . The need for land was a kind of a phantasm, a vague idea floating in a nebulous state through all minds and spirits. Everyone believed that the solution to the agrarian problem consisted in distributing land; yet no one knew where, or to whom, or what type of land. . . .

Meanwhile, the real agrarian problem, [the need to distribute] lands to the hundreds of thousands of pariahs who had none, was gradually becoming more urgent. We needed to give lands not to selected individuals, but to social groups. The fact that the people owned land in previous times made the solution simple and clear: restoration of that land to the people. All dispossessed populations naturally thought that restorations were the solution. [Many] communities . . . recalled that they had but recently lost their lands, and it was undeniable that their lands were taken by illegal means. Is it not natural for people to think that the restoration of their usurped lands will follow the triumph of a revolution that has promised them justice? [And is it not natural to suppose also] that a capitalist, however ambitious, will not willingly give up the lands that he had usurped? And that there will be some means of justice by which the unfortunate people who hunger for the land they once occupied will be satisfied and will return to living the way they lived for more than four hundred years, because their rights were established in the epoch of the Aztecs?

The logical but ingenuous system of land restorations was accepted, of course, by the Secretary of the Interior. All the populations seeking the return of their *ejidos* were invited to come forward and identify themselves and the size of their lands in order to see if restoration would be possible. But what actually happened was inevitable: it was not possible to restore the *ejidos*, because the greatest injustices in a people's history cannot be simply undone by a corresponding act of justice—they must be remedied in some other form. . . .

Let me now sketch out the problem as I understand it. At the risk of tiring the reader, I ask for your indulgence with regard to one point. I believe that politics is the most concrete of the sciences, as well as the most concrete of the arts, and extreme caution is needed to avoid rationalizations that rely on analogies with other countries and other periods. Our political system requires a personal and local knowledge of our country and our country's needs,

not general principles gathered from the study of other peoples. The antecedents that I draw upon to develop the resolution to this dilemma are not found in the histories of Rome, the English or French Revolutions, Australia, New Zealand, or even Argentina. There is only one country [and history] that can teach us the solutions: New Spain. . . . Two factors must be taken into consideration: the land and the people; the land, whose possession we will discuss, and the people, to whom lands should be given.

The Spanish occupants of New Spain at the time of the conquest respected the conditions that they found and, under the wise rule of Philip II, the indigenous peoples were not interfered with; later, villages were created through "reductions"<sup>1</sup> and the founding of colonies. In the Spaniards' view, such villages could not survive without their *casco*, their *ejidos*, and their *propios*. The *casco* [or *fundo legal*] was the land upon which the town itself was constructed; the *ejidos* were the communal lands of the village; and the *propios* were the village's public lands.

We need not concern ourselves with the *casco* at present. The *ejidos* and *propios*, however, have been very important economic entities in our country. Anyone who studies a land title from the colonial period can read on every page the transcendental struggle between villages and haciendas. In the conflicts between the villages and haciendas, the former triumphed thanks to their privileges, their organization, and effective means of cooperation among the villagers, developed over centuries. . . . But above all, they triumphed thanks to the enormous power that the villages retained through the possession of public lands [*propios*], which brought wealth and power, and of *ejidos*, which helped to preserve their communities.

The *ejidos* assured the people of their subsistence and the *propios* guaranteed the power of the village governments; the *ejidos* ensured tranquillity of the families gathered around the village church, and the *propios* brought economic power to the village authorities. The villagers were, in effect, communal landowners rather than individual owners of large landed estates. This was the secret behind the preservation of the villages in the face of the hacienda, in spite of the great political privileges held by Spanish landowners during the colonial period.

Later, the true nature of landownership became clear. Laws were passed mandating the breakup of lands held in "dead hands,"<sup>2</sup> and public lands were invariably considered a very dangerous form of landownership which needed to be ended, just as the lands of lay groups and religious institutions had to be dismantled.

The communities' situation with respect to the haciendas was a notoriously privileged one prior to the 1856 law of disamortization. This law was

perfectly justified economically, but I do not need to remind you gentlemen that, although the breakup of the public lands may have been necessary, the application of the law to the *ejidos* was a very serious mistake. The laws were applied to the *ejidos* in accordance with the circulars of October and December of 1856 which, rather than awarding the lands to individual tenants, stipulated that they be divided up and distributed among the villagers. This led to the disappearance of the *ejidos* and to the absolute impoverishment of the people. I would not say that all of the land was usurped, although much of it was; I will not say that all of the land was stolen with the connivance of the authorities, although there are thousands of such cases. But the distribution of the *ejidos* was naturally intended, for economic reasons, to transfer the land to those who could put it to better use. The lands eventually went from the villages into the hands of *hacendados*. You know the results of this process: in certain parts of the Republic, and principally in the area of the Central Mesa, all of the *ejidos* became part of the surrounding estates; communities like Jonacatepec, Jojutla . . . ; but, why do I need to mention Morelos? I will simply mention the Federal District: towns like San Juan Ixtayopan, Mixquic, Tlahuac, and Chalco were reduced to their own town boundaries, and in conditions so poor that even the most foolish of the Spanish monarchs or viceroys would not imagine that a people could live this way. . . . This is the situation of ninety percent of the population in the Central Mesa, which [Andrés] Molina Enríquez has called the cereal zone, where life makes no sense without the *ejidos*.

Some have fought against the disintegration of the *ejidos*, [and some villages] have even managed to preserve them. Not just one, but many villages have learned to resist the disintegration of their *ejidos*, using methods easily available to all. After distributing their lands among the villagers, they instinctively deposited their deeds with that person in town who merited the greatest confidence, until this chief . . . had collected all of these titles with the implicit charge of preserving and defending the people's land through a communal administration. In the state of Mexico, this system was used frequently, and it was perfected to the point where villages became practically cooperatives or corporations which existed with the aim of returning the village to a communal system, but using procedures more in line with modern social organization, according to the rather limited intelligence of the town clerks.

This was the means found to defend against the disappearance of communal property; but this strategy was entirely ineffective in the face of the avarice of the surrounding estates toward the distributed land. And so it went, whether through mismanagement by the small landholders or abuses by the authorities; what is certain is that the *ejidos* have passed almost entirely from the villages to the *hacendados*. As a consequence, a large number of popula-

tions currently are unable to satisfy their most basic needs. In the towns of the state of Morelos, in the southern part of Puebla, and in the state of Mexico, the villagers do not have enough land to feed a goat, or to collect what is ironically called firewood—although it is really only garbage—for the pariah's home; they do not have the means to satisfy the most basic needs of rural life, because there is not even a square meter left of the *ejidos* to provide for the population. Neither economic arguments nor scientific proof are needed to understand that people cannot live when they have no way to perform the agricultural tasks that used to ensure their survival.

The simplest means of remedying this situation is restoration of lands to the people. If the people of, say, Xtlahuaca or Jilotepec can remember that they once had *ejidos*, what could be simpler or more natural, now that the revolution that once promised justice and lands—and it did promise these things, no matter what anyone says—has triumphed, than for the people to request their *ejidos* once again? Restorations have been attempted, but in the most unjust ways imaginable. The most recent spoliations of the villages have been ineffective; they receive no support from any party, neither from the justice ministry, nor from this Chamber. On the other hand, the distribution of lands seized from small landholders and from villagers who managed to retain some part of their *ejidos* have received some support of the most unjust sort, for it comes primarily from local authorities who believe that by encouraging the pillaging of those who still have portions of their former *ejidos*, the situation will be saved. No one seems to see that the true restorations, those we should be attempting, are the ones that aim to recover the lands that have passed into the hands of large landowners, some of whom are completely protected by their influential families. Of course, some of the large landowners are foreigners, and their interests must be respected in order to protect Mexico's domestic and foreign credit. . . .

I hesitate to mention specific individuals, for I do not wish to shame anyone; but I will, with your permission, mention some. I will mention how, under the feudal domination of Iñigo Noriega, the villages of Xochimilco, Chalco and many other villages have been unable to take back lands that were usurped through the most unjust and violent means; the authorities continue to protect Iñigo Noriega and his enormous estates, which were established by pillaging the people. By contrast, there is the case of [the relatively small landowner] Aureliano Urrutia of Xochimilco, who must deal with the agitation of some individuals and some ridiculous local authorities who provoke the people with claims that his "enormous estate" of 300 hectares is a threat to the sacred promises proclaimed by the 1910 Revolution.

Thousands of cases like Urrutia's have occurred throughout the Republic,

and they have caused discontent to a great number of people. The example suggests a paradox, for it is the small landholders who are the principal victims of the restoration of lands, and they are cast as the enemies of any and all change in the economic condition of the people. Why such absurdity? Because the agrarian issue is the Achilles' heel of the Revolution. . . .

If the rural population had—as only a few communities [presently] do—lakes to fish in and lands to hunt on; or land to plant and harvest, even if under the vigilance of authorities; if there were woodlands from which people could gather material to make tiles, furniture, and firewood; [thereby solving] their food problems on a basis of freedom; if the rural working population had land where they could plant freely, even a small plot, workers could augment their salaries without relying on the hacienda; they could work on the hacienda during peak seasons for a more equitable wage, and during the rest of the year devote their energies to working for themselves. The *ejido* would give them these opportunities.

Until it is possible to create a system of small-scale agriculture to replace the current system of large estates, the agrarian problem can be resolved through the granting of *ejidos* as a means to complement the workers' salaries.

The complement to the workers' wages must come from communal possession of land for subsistence. There are some rural classes which must always serve as day laborers; but we cannot continue to use the political strength of the Government to force these classes to work all year on the haciendas for extremely low wages.

The large rural proprietors must resolve to test new agricultural systems which use workers only during the months when agriculture demands it, for the large farms do not absolutely require a permanent workforce. If the haciendas can get by with a maximum of six months and a minimum of four months of labor, and if the working population refuses to be enslaved by the haciendas and their Government allies, the workers either will take up their rifles and join the Zapatista ranks or they will find legal ways to employ their energies, exploiting the fields, plains and hills of the *ejidos*.

When a sick man lies prostrate in his bed or on the table awaiting the surgical knife, he closes his eyes, clenches his jaw and tells the doctor, "Cut," because his pain resigns him to the greatest heroics; when a man's whole head is swollen by a fearsome toothache and he goes to the dentist, he is resolved to have all his teeth extracted; but when the pain subsides, he is no longer disposed to make such sacrifices. It is the same in society: when a time of revolution arises, we must apply pressure to resolve problems; we must cut, we must demand sacrifices, because these are times when people are willing to make those sacrifices and changes can be made easily. When the storm clouds