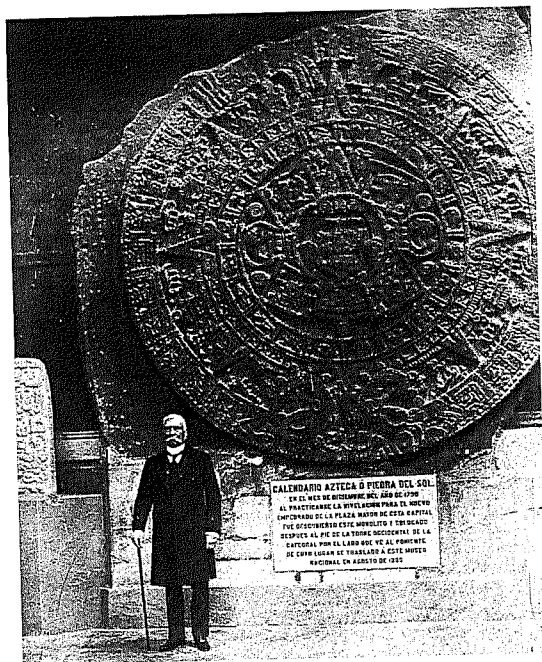


Porfirio Díaz Visits Yucatán

Channing Arnold and Frederick J. Tabor Frost

In 1876 General Porfirio Díaz, a hero in the war against the French, overthrew the government of Juárez's successor, Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada (who had come to office when Juárez died suddenly at the beginning of his fourth term, in 1872). Díaz's rallying cry was "Effective suffrage, no reelection"; yet, with the exception of a four-year interregnum, he would be Mexico's dictator until 1911, presiding over an increasingly harsh and corrupt system. The pace of the global economy greatly accelerated during these years, and countries like Mexico, which depended heavily on the export of raw materials to the industrialized nations, experienced a frenzied pace of change which proved, in general, to be bad news for the laborers of the country. As the demand for Mexico's exports grew, so too did the demands on labor. Working conditions in many areas—such as the tobacco plantations of the Valle Nacional in Oaxaca, the lumber camps of Chiapas, and the henequen fields of Yucatán—gained great notoriety as regions where the most barbaric forms of "slavery" were practiced. While many travelers to Mexico may certainly be accused of using the term slavery imprecisely, the conditions they described—debt servitude, extreme exploitation, corporal and even capital punishment—were harsh by any standard.

In their grim portrayal of conditions of life on Yucatecan haciendas, British travel writers Arnold and Frost were hardly scientific in their observations and were rather sweeping in their judgments. In their haste to indict the planters of Yucatán, they occasionally fall into factual errors. Moreover, they seem intent upon proving the notion that tourists tend to view other societies with an "imperial gaze": thus, they often compare the Yucatecan elite unfavorably with their more noble British counterparts; they allow that slavery may sometimes be a justifiable means of domesticating an inferior race; they favor corrective action by the United States; and they make much of the supposed docility of the Maya—a charge that was often made, but invariably mistaken. However, in their account of Porfirio Díaz's visit to Yucatán, Arnold and Frost hit upon a key feature of the regime: its tendency to treat Mexico's most grievous problems with that simplest of strategies, denial.



Porfirio Díaz poses in front of the Aztec sunstone.
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There would be no hardship [for the Maya of Yucatán] if—and it is a large, large IF—the patient toiler were a free man. The Yucatecans have a cruel proverb, “*Los Indios no oigan sino por las nalgas*” (“The Indians can hear only with their backs.”).¹ The Spanish half-breeds have taken a race once noble enough and broken them on the wheel of a tyranny so brutal that the heart of them is dead. The relations between the two peoples is ostensibly that of master and servant; but Yucatan is rotten with a foul slavery—the fouler and blacker because of its hypocrisy and pretence. . . .

The Yucatecan millionaires are very sensitive on the question of slavery, and well they may be: for their record is as black as [Simon] Legree’s in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. You have but to mention the word “slavery,” and they begin a lot of cringing apologetics as to the comforts of the Indians’ lives, the care taken of them, and the fatherly relations existing between the hacendado [*sic*] and his slaves. . . . They take just so much care of the Indians as reasonably prudent men always take of their live stock; so much and no more. . . .

A recent visit [was] paid to the country by President Díaz. It was the first

time during the whole of his long reign that the great man had troubled himself about the limestone peninsula which forms the furthermost eastern part of his dominions, and the trembling Yucatecans looked to the bolts of the cupboard in which the family skeleton was hidden, and they were not over-satisfied with those bolts. They had new locks made and new and thicker doors fixed so that august presidential ears should not be offended by the rattling of those most unfortunate bones. With their teeth chattering, they hastened to put their house in order and sweep and garnish it, for they knew quite well that the eyes into which they had to throw dust were eyes which could see further than most eyes. It was all the fault of a snobbish governor. Many a henequen lord must have cursed the self-importance of their parvenu chief which had induced in him such discontent with the Spartan-like simplicity of his rule at Merida that he must needs wish to entertain presidential guests and bask in the sunshine of the mighty Díaz’s approval. Díaz, they knew very well, cared little or nothing for Indians *qua* Indians. But Díaz cares immensely about the fair name of Mexico, which they knew they had done for years all they could to besmirch. Would he see the skeleton through the fatal door? If money and bribery were of any avail, those slave-owners would see to it that their terrible ruler should be fooled. But they had to calculate on more than his natural perspicacity. There was much reason to believe that ugly rumours had reached Mexico City of the slavery rife in Yucatan, and that the President’s visit was not unconnected with these. That skeleton must be cemented into its cupboard with the cement of millions of dollars if necessary.

Well, the President came. Never were there such junketings: night was turned into day; roadways were garlanded; gargantuan feasts were served. Lucullus never entertained Caesar with more gorgeous banquets than the henequen lords of Merida spread before Díaz. Small fortunes were spent on single meals. One luncheon party cost 50,000 dollars: a dinner cost 60,000, and so on. The official report of the reception reads like a piece out of the *Arabian Nights*. In their eagerness to keep that skeleton in its cupboard some of the hacendados actually mortgaged their estates. One of the most notable of the entertainments provided was that of a luncheon at a hacienda ninety miles south-east of the city of Merida. At the station where the President alighted for the drive to the farm, the roadway was strewn with flowers. Triumphal arches of flowers and laurels, of henequen, and one built of oranges surmounted by the national flag, spanned the route. The farm-workers lined the avenue of nearly two miles to the house, waving flags and strewing the road with flowers, while a *feu-de-joie* of signal rockets was fired on his alighting from his carriage. He then made a tour of the farm. Having inspected the hene-

quen machinery he (we quote from the official report) "visited the hospital of the finca, and the large chapel where the Catholic labourers worshipped; the gardens and the beautiful orchard of fruit trees; and during this tour of inspection he honoured several labourers by visiting their huts thatched with palm-leaf and standing in their own grounds well cultivated by the occupants. More than two hundred such houses constitute the beautiful village of this hacienda, which breathes an atmosphere of general happiness. Without doubt a beautiful spectacle is offered to the visitor to this lovely finca with its straight roads, its pretty village clustering round the central building surrounded by gardens of flower and fruit trees."

At the luncheon the President in the course of his speech said:—"Only can a visitor here realise the energy and perseverance which, continued through so many years, has resulted in all I have seen. Some writers who do not know this country, who have not seen, as I have, the labourers, have declared Yucatan to be disgraced with slavery. Their statements are the grossest calumny, as is proved by the very faces of the labourers, by their tranquil happiness. He who is a slave necessarily looks very different from those labourers I have seen in Yucatan." The prolonged cheers and measureless enthusiasm evoked by these words (one can understand how the conspirators chuckled at the success of their efforts at deception) were agreeably interrupted by the appearance of an old Indian, who made a speech of welcome in his own language, presenting a bouquet of wild flowers and a photographic album filled with views of the hacienda. It is not necessary to quote the fulsome stuff which had been placed in the mouth of the poor old man by his master. It is simply a string of meaningless compliments which ends with these words: "We kiss your hands; we hope that you may live many years for the good of Mexico and her States, among which is proud to reckon itself the ancient and indomitable [surely a pathetic adjective under the circumstances] land of the Mayans." Well may the official report say that "it is only justice to declare that the preparations of the feast and the decorations of the finca showed that the proprietor had been anxious to prepare everything with the most extraordinary magnificence."

This feast was a gigantic fraud, a colossally impertinent fake from start to finish. Preparations indeed! That is the exact word to describe the lavish entertainments of Mexico's ruler here and elsewhere in Yucatan. Tens of thousands of dollars were lavished to guard the hacendados' secrets. In this particular case the huts of the Indian labourers which the President visited were "fake" huts. They had been, every one of them, if not actually built for the occasion, cleaned, whitewashed, and metamorphosed beyond recognition. They had been furnished with American bentwood furniture. Every Indian matron had

been given a sewing-machine; every Indian lass had been trimmed out with finery and in some cases, it is said, actually provided with European hats. The model village round which the President was escorted was the fraud of a day; no sooner was his back turned than to the shops of Merida were returned sewing-machines, furniture, hats and everything, and the Indians relapsed again into that simplicity of furnitureless life which they probably cordially preferred. We are not quoting the "faking" of this village as an example of hardship dealt out to the Indians, but as a proof of the ludicrous efforts made by those whose fortunes have been and are being built on slave labour to hide the truth from General Díaz. As for the poor old Mayan who addressed him, and as for the deputations of whip-drilled Indians who were paraded before him to express their untold happiness and loyalty, they very well knew that they had got to do exactly what they were told to do. We are not exaggerating when we state that it would have cost any Indian his life to have even attempted to make General Díaz aware of the truth. No Indian throughout civilised Yucatan could have been found to make the attempt. For nothing is sadder than the lack of all manliness and spirit which characterises the average Indian workman. . . .

If the hardship of the Indians' lot was merely slavery, it might be argued that there were slender grounds for our indictment. Slavery may under certain circumstances be far from an evil, where the backward condition of a race is such as to justify its temporary existence, and where the slave-owner can be trusted. But the slave-owner can very seldom be trusted, and he certainly cannot be in Yucatan. It is no exaggeration to say that the enslavement of the Indians of Yucatan never has had, never can have, justification. Conceived in an unholy alliance between the Church and brute force, it has grown with the centuries into a race-degradation which has as its only objects the increasing of the millions of the slave-owners and the gratification of their foul lusts. The social condition of Yucatan to-day represents as infamous a conspiracy to exploit and prostitute a whole race as the history of the world affords. Yucatan is governed by a group of millionaire monopolists whose interests are identical, banded together to deny all justice to the Indians, who, if need be, are treated in a way an Englishman would blush to treat his dog. . . .

And so, after centuries of oppression, the race is dead, a chattel, body and soul, of a corrupt and degraded people. When the task of revivifying these poor Mayans with the elixir of freedom is undertaken, if it ever is (and pray God it be), by the United States of America, it will be as difficult as nursing back to convalescence a patient sick unto death. No beings will at first understand freedom so ill. They are like prisoners who have been for weary years

in the darkness of unlighted dungeons. The glare of the sunlight of freedom will be too dazzling for their poor atrophied eyes. They will shade them and cringe back into the gloom. . . .

Note

1. The term *nalgas* is a bit cruder than Arnold and Frost would have it. A better translation might be "backsides" or "rumps." *Ed.*