

Agrarian Reform, Oil Expropriation, and the Making of National Property in  
Postrevolutionary Mexico

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## ABSTRACT

### **Agrarian Reform, Oil Expropriation, and the Making of National Property in**

#### **Postrevolutionary Mexico**

**Ana Julia del Palacio Langer**

This dissertation explores the property regimes of postrevolutionary Mexico through a multi-layered analysis of struggles over territory in the oil-producing areas of the state of Veracruz. I analyze land petitions made by oil workers to establish the relationship between the 1930s agrarian reform program and the nationalization of the oil industry of 1938 in the context of a general re-definition of citizens' property rights after the revolution of 1910-1920. These events were essential in the construction of a revolutionary nationalism in Mexico. Arguably, in fact, Mexican nationalism has been built over specific legal and cultural notions of what constitutes the patrimony of the nation and citizens' right to participate in the national project by obtaining a piece of that patrimony, even if it is by force. I contend that the same laws that allowed the governments of the postrevolution to enforce the agrarian reform and to nationalize the oil industry, also gave them the power to organize, regulate, and limit land possession among regular folk with the goal of de-radicalizing dissident groups after the armed struggle.

Throughout the five chapters of this dissertation, I provide examples of individuals and communities that consistently competed for agricultural land and territory with foreign oil companies first and with Mexican Petroleum after the oil nationalization of 1938. These examples show the ways in which postrevolutionary leaders' constant

debates about property were understood and experienced on the ground. These instances also show how people living in or near the oil fields of Mexico fought for their property rights in part by engaging in these discussions—through letters and petitions—and in part by acting for or against the laws that since the enactment of the Constitution of 1917 regulated citizens' access to property. Actions included land invasions, the breaking of fences and other enclosures, and the organization of cooperatives and other coalitions to petition land or to occupy territory. These debates over property reveal the collision between the “ideal types” of social organization, political action, and property holding advanced by the postrevolutionary regime and the reality that citizens experienced every day.

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## Introduction

In 1941, two oil workers from the town of Minatitlán, southern Veracruz, wrote to president Manuel Ávila Camacho. In their letter, they accused Mexican Petroleum (Pemex)—the state company created after the 1938 nationalization of the oil industry—of pushing their families out of lands they had occupied since the time when British enterprise El Águila Petroleum Company operated in the area. The workers asked the president, as “chief of the great Mexican family” to stop Pemex’s harassment and allow them to remain on those plots; “otherwise” they said, “our homes and our crops will be destroyed without any consideration.” The two signers affirmed to have “put soul and heart” to give their children a patrimony, “planting fruit trees, buying some heads of cattle and other domestic animals.” The petitioners declared that they were “good Mexicans” and that, in their position as oil workers they had given “all their support” and approval to the oil expropriation undertaken by the “Supreme Government... A just and righteous action that returned to the Nation what was rightly hers.” As so many other patriots, the letter continued, they had “undying faith and trust that such expropriation would bring true well-being and tranquility for all oil workers and for everyone in the Republic.” They still believed it, they said. “However,” the letter concluded, they felt “deeply disappointed” at the fact that Pemex—a company for which they had sacrificed “youth and energies”—was now trying to push them out of their homes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Feliciano Basurto Martínez and Ernesto Bañares to Manuel Ávila Camacho. Minatitlán, Veracruz. May 30, 1941. Archivo General de la Nación-Ramo Presidentes/Manuel Ávila Camacho (hereafter AGN/MAC), 509/24.

This case in one of the largest oil-producing areas of Mexico, though small in scale compared to the larger history of the country's petroleum industry, raises questions about how Mexicans understood property rights in the postrevolutionary period. How did the changes in patterns of land possession and property ownership brought by the revolution of 1910-1920 affect different social groups? How did the industrialization project of the postrevolution modify Mexicans' relationship to agricultural property? How do these changes in land possession and property ownership look from a local, state, and national perspective? In the context of the agrarian reform program of the 1920s and 30s, how did government institutions deal with industrial workers' petitions for land?

To answer these questions, this dissertation explores the changes in property rights and property regimes between 1917 and 1960 by way of the struggles over territory in the oil-producing areas of Veracruz. Through a study of land petitions made by oil workers, I analyze the relationship between the agrarian reform program and the nationalization of the oil industry. I use those two events—which were central in the formation of postrevolutionary national identity—to illustrate the basic premise that guides this dissertation: that the governments of the postrevolution created a set of property laws and an aggressive rhetoric of patrimonialism to organize, regulate, and limit land possession with the goal of de-radicalizing social coalitions, political groups, and peasant and labor organizations after the revolution. The ways in which oil workers and the communities living near the oil fields of Veracruz discussed, resisted, and negotiated these laws and the changes in everyday life they produced are the central theme of this work. I explain how these groups challenged postrevolutionary property

laws, at the same time that they fought for their property rights and created their own definitions of postrevolutionary citizenship.

In the Mexican postrevolutionary rhetoric, social justice implied rightful land possession by small peasants. The Constitution of 1917, specifically Article 27, mandated that it was the federal government's responsibility to provide it. The Constitution also opened the possibility for the nationalization of strategic industries from foreign capitalists. As such, an expansive agrarian reform—through the expropriation of hacienda lands that became *national property*—and the government's control over subsoil resources turned into the regime's main goals and into the potential fulfillment of the “promises of the revolution.”

### **Changes of Property Rights After the Revolution**

In Mexico, the question of how property regimes are formed and the rights that individuals and the state hold over that property has occupied the minds of intellectuals, law scholars, and politicians since before the 1810 war of Independence, but the most important and incendiary debates came with the Reforma wars of 1858-1861.<sup>2</sup> Liberals and conservatives fought, among other issues, to define the control that the Church and

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<sup>2</sup> Enrique Florescano, “El problema agrario en los últimos años del virreinato, 1800-1821,” in Margarita Menegus Bornemann, *Problemas agrarios y propiedad en México, siglos XVIII y XIX* (México: El Colegio de México, 1995), 26-27. For a detailed account of the debates regarding the postindependence structure of property in Mexico, see Marte Gomez, *La cuestión agraria en los primeros congresos del México independiente* (México: Librería de Manuel Porrúa, 1955); Jesús Reyes Heróles, *El liberalismo mexicano, vols. I-III* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1975); Lucio Mendieta y Nuñez, “El artículo 27” in *El sistema agrario constitucional* (México: Porrúa, 1940); Germán Fernández del Castillo, “Regimen constitucional de la propiedad,” in *La propiedad y la expropiación en el Derecho mexicano actual* (México: Compañía Editora de Revistas, 1939).

indigenous groups held over land.<sup>3</sup> Land was of central importance to those two corporations. For the pueblos, communal ownership constituted the heart of the organization and the source of their main foodstuffs and monetary surplus. For the Church, land represented a foundation of political and economic power through the institution's role as real estate creditor.

At the end of the war, the winning liberals proposed that the new government take the measure of dividing the lands belonging to corporations and sell them as small plots to create a society of individual owners.<sup>4</sup> Such measures took full effect toward the end of the century, when president Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) hired a number of survey companies that drew maps and established geographical limits to agricultural and non-agricultural territories in an effort to privatize the countryside, attract foreign investment, and regulate landownership and production.<sup>5</sup> Since communal lands, like those of some indigenous communities, were not subject of direct property taxes individual owners resulting from the division would thus contribute to increase state revenue by paying direct annual property taxes.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the liberal and conservative ideologies and the Reforma wars see, Robert H Jackson, ed. *Liberals, the Church and Indian Peasants: Corporate Lands and the Challenge of Reform in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Charles A. Hale, *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Antonio Luna Arroyo, "Luces y sombras de la reforma agraria mexicana en la historia y en la actualidad," in *Anuario Mexicano de Historia del Derecho III* (1991): 111.

<sup>4</sup> For reappraisals of land policies of the porfiriato, see Robert Holden, *Mexico and the Survey of Public Lands: the Management of Modernization, 1876-1911* (DeKalb, Ill. Northern Illinois University Press, 1994); Emilio Kourí, "Interpreting the Expropriation of Indian Pueblo Lands in Porfirian Mexico: The Unexamined Legacies of Andrés Molina Enríquez," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82:1 (2002): 69-177.

<sup>5</sup> Menegus Bornemann, xix; Reyes Heroles, *El liberalismo mexicano, Tomo I. Los Orígenes*, 130.

Due to the massive dispossession of land among small peasants and indigenous groups that such measures produced, land reform became a central aspect of the revolutionary struggle, especially among factions in the central area of the country. Venustiano Carranza—revolutionary leader and president of Mexico between 1917 and 1919—therefore recognized the urgency of including a project of agrarian reform in his national project. He assigned legislator Luis Cabrera, the main thinker of the “land problem” in Mexico, to the task. Cabrera drafted the Agrarian Law of January 6, 1915, which became the cornerstone of the land reform program of the postrevolution.<sup>6</sup> The Law established that, to attain the restitution of communally owned plots (or, “ejidos”) to small peasants, “the pueblos that... cannot obtain restitution for lack of titles... will obtain them according to the requirements of the townspeople... keeping in the national government the responsibility of expropriating the necessary territories for this purpose.”<sup>7</sup> With this law, and with the founding of the National Agrarian Commission in 1917, the postrevolutionary agrarian reform was born.

In this context, members of the 1917 Congress drafted constitutional article 27, which addressed the land problem by inserting it within a larger question: what constitutes property, how will it be administrated, and who should own it? The first paragraph of Article 27 states, “ownership of the lands and waters within the boundaries of the national territory is vested originally in the Nation, which has had, and has, the

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<sup>6</sup> Jesús Silva Herzog, *Agrarismo mexicano y la reforma agraria: exposición y crítica* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964[1957]), 232-6; also, James L. Hamon and Stephen R. Niblo. *Precursores De La Revolución Agraria En México : Las Obras De Wistano Luis Orozco Y Andrés Molina Enríquez*. 1. ed, Sepsetentas (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Dirección General de Divulgación, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> My translation. Agrarian Law of 6 January 1915, in Idem, 233.

right to transmit title thereof to private persons, thereby constituting private property.”<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of the 1917 Constitution, the Mexican nation became the original owner and administrator of the territory with the responsibility of dividing it and granting land to those who needed it. The 1917 Constitution vested the nation with the ultimate authority to administer land, and the postrevolutionary regime made land granting and restitution a central aspect of the national project.

After the enactment of the Constitution and its agrarian laws, thousands of people all over Mexico began requesting land grants through the National and Local Agrarian Commissions (CNA and CLA respectively). As administrator of the territory, per the precepts of Article 27, the federal government granted lands to a larger or lesser extent depending on the utility of particular regions and types of land. In other words, the agrarian reform was used in large degree to define which areas of the country were strategic for industrial agriculture, the extraction of raw materials, and for industrial production in general.<sup>9</sup> In turn, these policies reflect the overall efforts of the

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<sup>8</sup> “Artículo 27,” in *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (México: Imprenta de la Secretaría de Gobierno, 1917), 18-27. See also, Jorge Carpizo. *La Constitución Mexicana de 1917* (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas/UNAM, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> For analyses of the strategic components of the agrarian reform and how it worked by region, see Frans Schryer, *Rancheros of Pisasflores: The History of a Peasant Bourgeoisie in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Romana Falcón, *Revolución y caciquismo: San Luis Potosí, 1910-1938* (México: Centro de Estudios Históricos/El Colegio de México, 1984); Armando Bartra, *Los herederos de Zapata* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1985); Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Christopher Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Raymond Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2004); John J. Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute: the Expropriation of American-Owned Rural Land in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).



postrevolutionary regime at centralizing political power and attaining a level of social peace through the creation or restructuring of institutions after the armed struggle.

The new agrarian laws specified eligibility to receive land grants with great detail: inhabitants of a town that lacked lands yielding more than double their daily pay; those who could demonstrate, through a report provided by the municipal authorities, that their town was located within a large estate or surrounded by large estates; those who did not have an economic activity beyond agriculture. The laws also defined which situations deserved the Agrarian Commissions' attention: when most of the population of a particular town was pushed back to agricultural work after an industry closed down; when need was demonstrated if the town had owned communal lands before June of 1856; when petitioners did not have an economic activity beyond agriculture. The extension of the grant was defined on the basis of a census that counted heads of family or male individuals over eighteen years of age; those who did not own other property or who were professionals in other fields.<sup>10</sup>

The agrarian reform, then, first envisioned as a mechanism to restitute lands to those who had lost them with the nineteenth century privatizations, became the mechanism to distribute lands to those who could establish a legitimate need.<sup>11</sup> The turn from justifying land restitution as a "historical right" to land distribution according to economic need, is a fundamental aspect of the postrevolutionary agrarian agenda.

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<sup>10</sup> Manuel Fábila, "Ley de Ejidos (1920)," *Cinco siglos de legislación agraria en México* (México: Talleres de la Industria Gráfica, 1941), 346-9.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the postrevolutionary government's agrarian policies see, *Congreso Constituyente (1916-1917): Diario de Debates* (México: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1985), "Artículo 27," in *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (México: Imprenta de la Secretaría de Gobierno, 1917), 18-27; Mendieta y Nuñez, "El artículo 27"; Fernández del Castillo, "Régimen constitucional de la propiedad."

Considering that very few communities were able to materialize property titles from the early nineteenth century, the postrevolutionary regime became the main agent of land administration. If land grants were provided respecting a primordial title, the federal government would be abiding by a historical right. In turn, if lands were distributed according to need, it was the prerogative of the president of the Republic through the National and Local Agrarian Commissions to decide who deserved those lands, including their extension and jurisdiction. These regulations gave the new regime full administrative power over the territory. Such power increased when peasants became dependent on government credits for production and infrastructure.<sup>12</sup>

Article 27 also established the general principle that all lands, waters, and underground resources within the national territory are inalienable and imprescriptible. The nation, then, maintains direct control of these substances at all times and can only surrender their exploitation through concessions.<sup>13</sup> These concessions are given only by the federal government and are subject to the specific regulations.

During the colonial period the Spanish Crown maintained the right of ownership and exploitation of all resources, providing grants of land and mineral exploitation to individuals or groups of people. The subsoil remained, through the three centuries of Spanish domination in Mexico, the property of the Crown. In the late nineteenth century,

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<sup>12</sup> See, Arnaldo Córdova, *La ideología de la revolución mexicana. La formación del nuevo régimen* (México: Editorial Era, 2007 [1973]), 233-248 and Félix F. Palavicini, *Historia de la Constitución de 1917* (México: Consejo Editorial del Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 1980), 11-21.

<sup>13</sup> For more on oil laws and the postrevolutionary legislation see, Eduardo Prieto, *Régimen de propiedad minera y petrolera* (México: Imprenta Mundial, 1935); Germán Fernández del Castillo, *La propiedad y la expropiación en el Derecho mexicano actual* (México: Compañía Editora de Revistas, 1939); Merrill Rippey, *Oil and the Mexican Revolution* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1972); Jonathan Brown, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico*, (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1983); Carpizo, *La Constitución*.

Porfirio Díaz made a series of changes to the mineral laws, making the owners of the surface automatic proprietors of the subsoil, thus surrendering the government's control over its subsoil resources, specifically charcoal and petroleum.<sup>14</sup> Such laws allowed foreign companies to exploit Mexican oil since 1901 until 1938, until the moment when the Mexican government nationalized the petroleum industry on legal bases drew from Article 27.

The legislative measures undertaken to demarcate and administer property regimes after the armed struggle were consequence of an also redefined notion of collective ownership of a national patrimony. The elements that constituted that patrimony—land and water, underground resources, historic landmarks, and archeological objects—became unifying tools when government officials portrayed them as symbols of citizenship and national sovereignty.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding the oil nationalization and the creation of Mexican Petroleum, the state monopoly in charge of extraction and production, produced what some have called an “oil mystique.”<sup>16</sup> Related to the patrimonialist rhetoric associated with its creation—Mexican oil belongs to

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<sup>14</sup> Prieto, *Régimen de propiedad*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> See the following works on national patrimony in Mexico: Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (México: Imprenta de A. Carranza, 1909); Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico : An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Antonio Azuela, “Durkheim y la tentación contractualista. Notas sobre la dimensión mítica del patrimonio nacional en México,” in *¿Por qué leer a Durkheim hoy?* Edited by Juan Carlos Geneyro, Antonio Azuela and Juan Carlos Marín (México: Editorial Fontamara, 2009); Azuela, “Los problemas que están detrás,” in *En busca de Molina Enríquez: cien años de los grandes problemas nacionales*. Edited by Emilio Kourí (México: El Colegio de México, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Isidro Morales, “The Consolidation and Expansion of Pemex, 1947-1958,” in *The Mexican Petroleum Industry*, edited by Jonathan Brown and Alan Knight (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 209.

all Mexicans—this mystique was the result of a redefinition of property and property rights that came with the Mexican revolution.

The components of article 27 that favored small landownership and government's control over subsoil resources produced a notion of communal proprietorship that characterizes Mexican national identity even today. However, when first enacted, these laws led to conflictive, and many times muddled, understandings of what constituted property ownership. The postrevolutionary rhetoric that treated the creation of national property through expropriations contributed to a misperception among citizens regarding their individual property rights and the role they would play in partaking in and protecting the patrimony of the nation. In other words, government officials talked about national property as the patrimony of all Mexicans and promised land to those who needed it. In reality, the state built a powerful administrative and bureaucratic apparatus that controlled all aspects of landownership in Mexico and distributed plots based on very specific political agendas. One basic aspect that shaped this redistribution of land was the corporatization project initiated by the post-1917 governments, which pretended to redefine citizenship rights based on a reorganization of society in socioeconomic groups. In this scheme, the “collectivity” came before any individual right.

### **The Oil Industry and the Mexican Corporatist State**

After the revolution of 1910-1917, citizenship in Mexico was subsumed in a system of collectivities instituted by the official party formed in 1928—the Party of the National Revolution, PNR—and consolidated in the 1930s. The PNR, in the words of its

leaders, “was formed with the sincere purposes of collective fraternity... with the fundamental logic of keeping revolutionary unity in all the moments when men’s selfish interests pretend to shadow the noble rights and prerogatives of the collectivity.”<sup>17</sup> The modern citizen, then, was born out of a corporatist conception.

Mostly during the Lázaro Cárdenas’s presidency (1934-1940), the official party modified the organization of Mexican society based on this governing philosophy, which favored groups above individuals. With this came modifications to conceptions of property. Cárdenas’s insistence that the ejido—basically a communal type of property—was the best means to empower the Mexican peasantry; his doggedness on workers’ unionization and the formation of confederations; and the patrimonialist rhetoric that accompanied some of his most ambitious projects of expropriation and land redistribution—La Laguna, Lombardía and Nueva Italia, the oil nationalization—show this collective focus. Individualism, thought Cárdenas, was the seed of selfishness, anarchy, and chaos. The function of the government, he considered, was to create “total unification.”

Cárdenas transformed the PNR into the Party of the Mexican Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Mexicana - PRM) in 1938, only twelve days after the expropriation of the oil industry. One of the goals of this change was the formalization of this corporatist system by establishing four basic socioeconomic sectors that would cooperate with the official party through their respective confederations—peasants, industrial workers, the “popular sector” (basically the urban middle classes), and the military. Under the PRM’s

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<sup>17</sup> Lázaro Cárdenas, “Acceptance Speech as Presidential Candidate, December 5, 1933,” in Partido Nacional Revolucionario, *La gira del general Lázaro Cárdenas* (México: Partido Revolucionario Institucional, 1986), 34.

wing, then, these organizations would abide by “the public cooperation close to the government,” required for national unity.<sup>18</sup> Though specific interests guided each of these sectors, they all had to work toward achieving the ultimate goal of defending the principles of the revolution and creating “a single fighting front in all the Republic.”<sup>19</sup>

This organizing principle would allow the postrevolutionary regime to attain political control, national unity, and “indivisible peace” after the armed struggle. It would also constrain individuals’ political participation to the general desires and interests of their respective groups. But this sectorial division represented a set of ideal types that did not reflect singular realities, especially in areas of oil production that for many years attracted people who were both peasants and industrial workers. In the official structure, however, the peasantry and the proletariat began occupying different spaces in the national project. The regime treated them as separate groups with distinct sets of prerogatives, attributing the demand for land rights mainly to rural populations. But in their fight for improved living conditions, oil workers spoke a language of revolutionary justice that included requests for land just like that employed by small peasants during the same period.

The incident in Minatitlán narrated at the beginning of this introduction—which shows industrial workers making a claim on agricultural land—indeed hints that the system of sectors may have been more of a project than a reality. It leads to questions about the ways in which social actors challenged the centralization efforts of the regime; and how people on the ground understood and adapted the governments’ rhetoric of patrimonialism—basically, a discourse that announced land and oil as the patrimony of all

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<sup>18</sup> Cárdenas, “Speech of June 19, 1934 in Saltillo, Coahuila,” in *La gira*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, 26.

Mexicans—to fit their own particular realities. It also reveals the need to understand how the property laws of the postrevolution and the governmental policies of land possession contributed to the attempts at dividing society into socioeconomic sectors. I show, through this and other examples of struggles over land in the oil areas of Veracruz, the impossibility of a system that divided Mexican society under such a strict and controlled scheme.

The incident also begs for questions about the particularities of the oil industry and its workers. Oil laborers were from rural origins in a great number of cases. They also very quickly became some of the best-paid industrial proletariat in the country, being able to move from oil field to oil field at their convenience at the hype of oil production in Mexico during the 1920s. They therefore formed an ambulatory population in two senses: moving from the rural into the industrial world, and constantly traveling from one field to another. This characteristic allowed them to share knowledge, experience different working conditions from place to place, and to become more selective in terms of the conditions under which they wished to live and work compared to other industrial groups in Mexico. These particularities made them one of the most militant and feisty workforces. Indeed, among their union ranks were members of the communist party and anarcho-syndicalist groups. In sum, they were a group that encompassed populations of different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and who had various understandings of their property rights based on different ideas of what it meant to be industrial workers in areas that were in many cases deeply rural.

Despite the fact, then, that oil workers seemed to be a perfect example of a successful industrial proletariat—high working-class consciousness, labor militancy,

decent wages, high levels of political participation—they did not entirely fit the mold. At least not in the way in which the regime envisioned the Mexican working class. These laborers in many cases expressed their need and desire to become landowners or ejidatarios, showing a deep attachment to agriculture and a great knowledge of the potential benefits of the agrarian reform. What type of relationship, then, would individuals who worked for the oil industry, but remained attached to agriculture, develop with the regime, particularly in a political context that left little room for what I would call “cross-sectorialization”? In other words, for people who belonged to both the agricultural and industrial worlds, the constrained participation in the political life of the country that the sectorial system of Cardenismo offered, plus the fact that industrial workers were not included in the agrarian reform program, proved unsatisfying at best and unbearable at worst.

The relationship that oil workers developed toward land was fundamental in their struggle for property and citizenship rights, but they have hardly been studied from a perspective that is not union politics and labor rights. Indeed, though a number of scholars have analyzed the lives of oil laborers from various perspectives, in general the literature on the Mexican oil industry—that of Latin America, really—has tended to focus to a large degree on the high politics and diplomacy of oil exploitation, the economics surrounding production, or on the labor politics of petroleum workers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See for example, Lorenzo Meyer, *México Y Los Estados Unidos En El Conflicto Petrolero, 1917-1942*. 2. ed, Colección Centro De Estudios Internacionales (México: Colegio de México, 1972); Meyer and Isidro Morales. *Petróleo Y Nación : La Política Petrolera En México (1900-1987)*. 1. ed. (México, D.F.: Petróleos Mexicanos : Secretaría de Energía Colegio de México : Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990); Ruth Aguilera, “Political Survival, Energy Policies, and Multinational Corporations: A Historical Study of Standard Oil of New Jersey in Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela in the Twentieth



Though some exceptions to this approach have studied the environmental consequences of hydrocarbon exploitation,<sup>21</sup> the moral economy of oil laborers,<sup>22</sup> and the internal organization of oil firms, there is still much work to be done to better understand the Mexican oil industry and its laborers.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of the recent discussions on energy reform in Mexico, a number of journalists, political analysts, and historians have considered that the Mexican government, as well as the foreign companies that begin operating in the oil zones, need to consider the idiosyncrasies of Mexican oil workers and the communities that live near petroleum fields to be able to develop a profitable and ethical business.<sup>24</sup> This applies

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Century.” *Management International Review* 50 (2010): 347-78. Joel Álvarez de la Borda, *Los orígenes de la industria petrolera en México, 1900-1925* (Mexico: Pemex, 2005); Enrique Velasco-Ibarra, “The Political Economy of Institutional Change in the Mexican Oil Industry,” PhD Diss., Johns Hopkins, 2002; Stephen Haber, Armando Razo, and Noel Maurer, *The Politics of Property Rights: Political Instability, Credible Commitments, and Economic Growth in Mexico 1876-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Haber, Razo, and Maurer, “When the Law Does Not Matter: The Rise and Decline of the Mexican Oil Industry,” *Journal of Economic History* 63 (2003): 1-32; Maurer, “The Empire Struck Back: The Mexican Oil Expropriation Reconsidered,” Harvard Business School Working Paper 10-108, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Myrna I. Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil : Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938*, Studies in Environment and History (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Lief Adleson, “Causalidad y conciencia: factores convergentes en la fundación de los sindicatos petroleros de Tampico durante la década de los veinte,” in *El trabajo y los trabajadores en la historia de México* (Mexico: COLMEX, 1979); Alberto Olvera, “Origen social, condiciones de vida y organización sindical de los trabajadores petroleros de Poza Rica, 1932-1935,” in *Anuario IV* (Xalapa: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas/Universidad Veracruzana, 1986); Jonathan Brown, *Oil*; Brown, “Acting for Themselves: Workers and the Mexican Oil Nationalization,” in *Workers’ Control in Latin America, 1930-1970*, ed. Jonathan Brown (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Isidro Morales, “The Consolidation and Expansion of Pemex, 1947-1958” and “Pemex during the 1960s and the Crisis of Self-Sufficiency,” in Brown and Knight, 208-32 and 233-55.

<sup>24</sup> Some examples are, “Mexico Moves to Overhaul Oil Industry,” in *The Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2013; “No permitiremos que el gobierno nos arrebatte la tierra:

particularly to northern Veracruz, where massive projects for natural gas extraction are being carried out. Mexican officials also needs to understand the unique circumstances of these communities in order to provide the appropriate oversight, social services, and protection to citizen's property and labor rights in this area. This dissertation provides a new approach to the historical understanding of those so-called "idiosyncrasies" and reveals an unexplored layer in the formation of the postrevolutionary Mexican state that the struggles over property in Veracruz reveal in all its complexity.

### **The Corporatist State and the Historiography of Postrevolutionary Mexico**

After the Mexican revolution—the first major social upheaval of the twentieth century—the popular mobilization and political turmoil quieted down while the country entered into its period of “institutionalized revolution.” Indeed, by the 1960s, the postrevolutionary one-party system that emanated from the struggle enjoyed the reputation of being one of the strongest, most stable governments in Latin America. Challenging this view, especially after the oppression of labor unions in the 1950s and teachers and students in the late 1960s, a number of scholars uncovered the postrevolutionary regime as a violent, authoritative, and overbearingly bureaucratic system that sought to advance a capitalist project at the expense of small landownership, labor union democracy, citizenship rights, and political participation.<sup>25</sup>

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pueblos indios,” in *La Jornada*, August 18, 2014; “Campesinos presentarán amparo contra Poder Legislativo por reforma energética,” in *La Jornada*, August 13, 2014; “Villahermosa, capital petrolera de México: Jesús Reyes Heróles,” in *La Prensa*, September 25, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Arnaldo Córdova, *La ideología de la Revolución Mexicana. La formación de un nuevo regimen* (México: Ediciones Era, 1973); Córdova, *La política de masas del cardenismo*

The basic organizational structure of the party—the sectorial division outlined above—provided the regime with opportunities to control peasant and labor politics and organizations. Corporatism replaced, according to these authors, the militaristic control that would have otherwise kept the population in check as it happened in other Latin American countries.<sup>26</sup> The main tenet of this body of work—which tended to focus mainly (and sometimes solely) in the national arena—was that the postrevolutionary regime achieved the centralization of power at the national level through power brokers, such as caciques, coopted generals, and loyal agraristas and union leaders. Finally, this historiographical trend argued that Lázaro Cárdenas was successful in mobilizing support and strengthening his social base among workers and peasants through a series of populist actions that seemed to fulfill these groups’ demands for land and labor rights, but that also curtailed their political participation by forcing them to depend on the Party’s patronage to obtain agrarian credits and protection from company owners.

Most recently, historians have provided what has been called a “postrevisionist” perspective. This approach delivers nuanced views of the postrevolutionary period, especially through regional studies that reveal the construction and maintenance of power through a hegemonic relationship between state and citizens. Historians began to look at cultural practices and social movements in equal terms to understand the process through

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(Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1989); Arturo Anguiano, Guadalupe Pacheco, and Rogelio Vizcaino. *Cárdenas y la izquierda mexicana* (México: Juan Pablos Editores, 1975); Jorge Basurto, *El conflicto internacional en torno al petróleo de México* (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1976); Alicia Hernández Chávez, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana. La mecánica cardenista* (México: El Colegio de México, 1979); Tzvi Medin, *El sexenio alemanista: ideología y praxis política de Miguel Alemán* (México: Ediciones Era, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> See Jeffrey Rubin, “Decentering the Regime: Cultural and Regional Politics in Mexico,” *Latin American Research Review* 31:3 (1996): 91.

which the revolutionary struggle gave way to a postrevolutionary project that was both oppressive and weak. Such project at the same time empowered and restrained popular groups for the advancement of the official Party's agenda. The post-revisionist scholarship recognized the important role that subordinated groups played in the formation of the postrevolutionary Mexican state.

These literatures have attempted to unveil people's burgeoning participation in civil life and the ways they challenged or adopted state directives that were most relevant to their particular realities.<sup>27</sup> Postrevisionist historians have provided analyses that consider how people contested, appropriated, and redefined state directives and how different social groups contributed to the construction of the postrevolutionary national project.<sup>28</sup>

My various arguments regarding land possession in Veracruz, oil communities' struggles for their property rights, and the rhetoric of patrimonialism that accompanied

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Gilbert Joseph M. and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Marjorie Becker, "Black and White and Color: Cardenismo and the Search for a Campesino Ideology," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29:3 (Jul. 1987): 453-465; Idem, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants and the Redemption of the Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Adrian Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1998). Rubin, "Decentering the Regime"; Alan Knight, "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 74:3 (1994): 393-444; Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised*; Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*; William H. Beezley and David E. Lorey, *Viva Mexico! Viva La Independencia!: Celebrations of September 16, Latin American Silhouettes*. Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2001; Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French. *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance : Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, Latin American Silhouettes. (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1994); Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo Donato Salvatore. *Close Encounters of Empire : Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Rubin, 90.

political action in these areas enters in dialogue with revisionist and postrevisionist literature alike. Although I generally agree with the standpoint provided by the postrevisionist historiography regarding the need to question the power of a central state through careful observation of the cultural aspects of social struggle, I have also discovered that in the oil areas of Veracruz, the central power was constantly present in part because these were strategic areas for industrialization that needed to remain in peace for a well-functioning industry. Additionally, Veracruz, as other states in eastern Mexico—Tabasco and Yucatán most notably—was the cradle of some of the most radical political mobilizations of the postrevolution. The federal government, then, intervened in local politics and in the lives of the oil communities through several different channels—through power brokers, military intervention, closing off of territory—to insure oil production and social peace. In other words, the central government was, in certain areas of Veracruz, very much a leviathan.

This dissertation, then, unfolds from three fundamental ideas, 1) The Mexican postrevolutionary regime created new property laws with the purpose of achieving social and political control in certain areas of the country; 2) the agrarian reform and the oil nationalization are clear examples of how changes in law and practice affected relationships between localities and the central government; 3) this was a system that ignored the complexities of Mexican society by pushing too hard toward the formation of socioeconomic sectors.

Based of these premises, I show that the struggles for land in the oil areas offer unparalleled examples of how the official Party as benefactor, administrator, and bureaucratic monster in theory controlled all aspects of property ownership. In practice,

individuals many times shaped their relationship to land and patrimony outside the frame provided by the government, challenging the corporate definition of citizenship that the postrevolutionary regime advanced through the creation of sectors. This fact allows us to see aspects of individuals' and communities' experiences in a particular context that would otherwise be overlooked. In this case, I have been able to trace an aspect of the social history of Mexican oil workers that had not been explored before: the ways they understood their property rights and negotiated their citizenship through their relationship to agricultural land.

## **Chapters**

This dissertation provides a multi-layered analysis of agrarian conflicts in the oil producing areas of Veracruz. All of the chapters cover the period 1920 to 1940, except the last one, which goes until 1960. Chapter chronologies vary somewhat, according to theme and context, but taken together they provide an integral view of a social process. Chapter one explains the arrival of rural populations to the oil fields of Veracruz. I start by providing a general history of the state of Veracruz and then move to study the demographic pressure that new populations produced. Here, I am particularly interested in the ideas that these populations brought regarding the agrarian reform and how such ideas led to constant struggles over land during these first decades of oil production. I also explain the sectorial division encouraged by the governments of the immediate postrevolution, which granted separate rights, responsibilities, and political participation to peasants and industrial workers. This chapter shows that such division did not—and could not—translate to reality on the ground by providing examples of people and

communities that lived in both the agricultural and industrial worlds and understood their rights beyond the categorization imposed by the regime.

Chapter two examines how the people living near the oil fields of Veracruz experienced the re-accommodation of space with the arrival of foreign companies and the growth of the oil industry before 1938. Influenced by the literatures on the “enclosure of the commons,” in this chapter I show how the encroachment of territory, roads, and water performed by the foreign companies affected the ways in which oil communities understood their role in the national project. I pay particular attention to how such enclosures affected the process of unionization among oil workers by isolating them in their oil camps and limiting their mobility and communication. I contend that the territorial control that foreign oil companies held over some areas of Veracruz delayed the formation of a working-class consciousness among laborers in the oil fields, which in turn allowed them to remain deeply connected to the agricultural world. In the end, I show, the dynamic of inclusion/exclusion that such enclosures produced shaped these communities’ views on national property, patrimony, and landownership.

Chapter three establishes the relationship between the agrarian reform program and the oil nationalization of 1938. It focuses on how the interventionist policies of the PNR outlined in the *Six Year Plan* and carried out through the 1934 Agrarian Code and the 1936 Expropriation Law, not only gave juridical and ideological basis to the oil nationalization of 1938, but they also opened the path to policies that guaranteed social and political control of different regions. I show how these policies helped neutralize agrarian and labor radicalisms in Veracruz and contend that one result of the oil nationalization was that it put strategic areas “off limits” for the agrarian reform and so

undermined the struggles over land that had been taking place in those areas since the 1920s. By putting lands under the control of Pemex president Cárdenas essentially made them national patrimony, allowing the federal government, through the state company, to control the use of oil lands without violating the revolutionary pact that had the agrarian reform at its center. This approach allows me to go beyond the traditional labor-centered approach to the expropriation of the oil industry and see it as an issue of property rights where the agrarian reform had a more important effect than is usually believed.

Chapter four outlines the difficulties experienced by the government and oil workers after the nationalization of the industry. It mostly focuses on the regime's rhetoric that made the expropriation a heroic feat that invalidated any discourse that questioned or contravened it. Here I analyze the types of problems that oil communities experienced with Pemex in the fields of Veracruz, as well as the disappointment that unionized oil workers suffered at the sight of their dwindling participation within the national company during the years after the nationalization. I show that once the euphoria of the March 1938 events subsided and a reality in which the foreign companies were replaced by an equally forceful institution sank in, oil communities were obligated to reshape their own rhetoric to continue to defend their property rights against the grubbing hands of the petroleum company and the government.

Finally, chapter five follows the case of oil cacique Jaime Merino in 1950s Poza Rica. I show that the arrival of Mexican Petroleum to northern Veracruz translated, in theory, into further control of the federal government over local politics and union militancy, as well as housing and public services. In practice, many in Poza Rica tried to resist such control and responded by creating their own rules of political participation.



Pemex brought with it power brokers that were different from those that had operated before the expropriation. At the same time, oil workers, peasants, and other groups contested the federal government's control over the political life of the city and negotiated their property rights with Pemex representatives who had access to the infrastructure, machinery, and transportation needed for the construction of workers' housing. Such dynamic reveals a new type of political consciousness and participation that came with the growth of industrialization and, in turn, of the middle classes.

### **Chapter 1: Peasants in the Oil Fields: Challenging State-Defined Citizenship Categories**

This chapter is about the rural populations that migrated to the oil fields of northeast Mexico between the 1920s and the 1940s—people who formed a group of transitory workers. Moving constantly from the rural to the industrial world and back, the actions of these workers challenged the system of sectors that the postrevolutionary regime put in place, especially during the presidential term of Lázaro Cárdenas. These sectors corresponded to different groups' socioeconomic activities—i.e. peasants, workers, the military, the “popular sector” (urban middle classes). The purpose of this division was to better administer public resources, to organize labor and peasant politics, and to create the relevant institutions that would cater to these particular groups. Its consequence was a static definition of each group's political agenda and bread-and-butter concerns. This chapter explores the “gray area” that rural populations working for the oil industry inhabited in relation to the sectorialization project of the postrevolutionary state and its institutions.

Historians of Mexico have typically mimicked this social separation, focusing on each group's moral economy, political culture, and class identity and in general studying peasants and workers as different units with a specific set of prerogatives.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, historians of the Mexican oil industry have considered oil workers as an industrial proletariat without contemplating that they remained, even after the nationalization of the industry in 1938, very close to the rural world. I show here that the regime's efforts to govern by sectors put certain limits on the property rights of laborers of the oil industry. At the same time, however, the official discourse that placed the agrarian reform as the fundamental revolutionary promise allowed oil workers to overstep those limits. Understanding their importance as producers of the foremost strategic resource in the country, they demanded lands as a fundamental right. Most notably through their condition as Mexican citizens vis à vis the foreign capitalists that operated in the area. In other words, the agrarian reform allowed these workers to participate in the national project as both peasants and industrial laborers.

To argue this, I first provide a general overview of land tenure in Veracruz and the arrival of rural populations to the oil fields of the state. I then outline of the formation of the postrevolutionary corporatist state and its relationship with the agrarian thought and policies that prevailed from Venustiano Carranza's agrarian law of 1915 going up to the agrarian code of 1934. Then, through a study of agrarian struggles in the oil fields of

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<sup>29</sup> Notable exceptions exist, of course. See Jane-Dale Lloyd, *El proceso de modernización capitalista en el noroeste de Chihuahua, 1880-1910* (México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1987); also William French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); for the Peruvian case, Josh DeWind, *Peasants Become Miners: The Evolution of Industrial Mining Systems in Peru, 1902-1974* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1987).

Veracruz, I show that the migrant populations that arrived there from rural regions in the 1910s and early 20s—and who became a militant proletariat in the 1930s and 1940s—lived in a "gray area" within the system of sectors, which affected their citizenship and property rights through the first fifty years of oil production in Mexico. Lastly, by studying conflicts over housing in the oil areas of Veracruz, I highlight the need to question traditional notions of property and property rights that focus mainly on the Mexican peasantry. I leave clear that, in the case of oil communities of the state of Veracruz, a political and social context where land possession—as was shaped by the postrevolutionary federal authorities through the relevant agrarian laws and institutions—redefined the notions of citizenship among thousands of individuals who, in many cases, did not fit the government's characterization of a "deserving" socioeconomic sector.

### **The Beginnings of a (Land) Problem**

Veracruz sits on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, occupying a little over 70,000 square kilometers of the ca. 2 million that comprise the entire Mexican Republic. Since the consolidation of what is today the Mexican territory in the mid-nineteenth century, Veracruz has remained one of the largest states in the country, which accounts for its variety in climate, agriculture, and subsoil products.<sup>30</sup> Veracruz is rich in natural

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<sup>30</sup> The bulk of this section is based on the following works: William T. Sanders, "The Anthropogeography of Central Veracruz," *Huastecos, Totonacos y sus vecinos*, Special issue, *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos*, vol. 13, nos. 2-3 (1952-53); Antonio Escobar Ohmstede, *Ciento cincuenta años de historia de la Huasteca* (Veracruz: Instituto Veracruzano de Cultura, 1998); *Historia general de Veracruz*; Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided*; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*; Jonathan Brown, "Domestic Politics and Foreign

resources—precious woods, exotic fauna, and a climate suitable for the production of a variety of crops—and has always attracted the interest of national and foreign investors. Northern and central Veracruz were populated by Huastec and Totonac groups since the pre-Conquest period, but other large areas of the state remained virtually uninhabited until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The central areas—the Port of Veracruz and Jalapa, particularly—were populated since the colonial period.

**Map 1- Veracruz, Mexico**



Source: Author’s own elaboration on map by: INEGI. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, Mexico. [http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/mapas/pdf/nacional/div\\_territorial/nacionalestados.pdf](http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/mapas/pdf/nacional/div_territorial/nacionalestados.pdf)

Investment: British Development of Mexican Petroleum, 1889-1911,” *The Business History Review* Vol. 61, No. 3 (Autumn 1987): 387-416.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Veracruz had at least three important cities—Veracruz, Xalapa, and Tuxpan—and most of the population lived in the central area of the state. The rest was occupied by scattered indigenous groups, especially in northern Veracruz, and large haciendas with their respective workforces.<sup>31</sup> Because of this particular demographic composition and the way these populations were distributed throughout the state, the land policies that president Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) instituted affected Veracruz in ways that were different from other areas of the country. Generally, these Porfirian policies led to the privatization of large areas of land, some of which the government owned—public lands—and others that belonged to indigenous groups.

By the 1880, then, through a mix of liberal policies of land distribution and the work of the survey companies, state and municipal governments started pushing relentlessly for privatization, which led many communities to adopt the system of *condueñazgos*, or private plots owned by several shareholders. Because much of what occurred on the ground in each state depended on old land tenure traditions, on the number of people occupying agricultural lands, the strategic importance of the region for the economic development of the country, and on the political interests of the local authorities, it is hard to make generalizations regarding the process of land regularization. For example, historian Raymond Craib points out that in Veracruz, “from 1826 to 1856 not a single community land... was divided into individual freehold parcels.”<sup>32</sup> However,

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<sup>31</sup> Silvia Méndez Maín, “La población en el siglo XIX,” in *Historia general de Veracruz*, coord. Martín Aguilar Sánchez and Juan Ortiz Escamilla (Xalapa, Ver. Universidad Veracruzana, 2011), 281-317.

<sup>32</sup> Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*, 99.

the privatization efforts of the Porifriato, though less extensive and violent than is usually believed, still contributed to reshape land tenure regimes in the state.<sup>33</sup>

The so-called *Pax Porfiriana* was also a period of rapid economic development through massive infusion of foreign capital. By 1911, the country had attracted an estimated 3.4 billion pesos in direct investment and loans from other countries. Between 1877 and 1910 Mexico grew at an annual rate of 2.3 percent.<sup>34</sup> The oil companies that began operating in Mexico starting in 1901, contributed in part to this growth and their operation and development until 1917 was thanks in large part to Porifiran changes to subsoil laws.

Through the three centuries of Spanish domination in Mexico, the subsoil remained the property of the Crown and the legislation over mining rights remained mostly untouched since Carlos III's 1783 *Ordenanzas de Minería*. It was only during the Porfiriato that the law began to change. In 1883, Manuel González published a decree giving the Federal Executive the right to draft a new mining code, which until then had been the responsibility and prerogative of Congress.<sup>35</sup> The 1884 Mining Code declared, for the first time, that the owner of the surface had rights over the subsoil substances found in his or her territory. Porfirio Díaz then released two more mine laws—Ley Minera of June 4, 1909 and Ley Minera of November 25, 1909—making the owners of

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<sup>33</sup> For re-appraisals of Porfirian land policies see, John H. Coatsworth, *Growth Against Development: The Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981); Robert Holden, "Priorities of the State in the Survey of the Public Lands in Mexico, 1876-1911," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 70: 4 (Nov. 1990): 579; in Kourí, "Interpreting."

<sup>34</sup> Brown, "Domestic Politics," 392. For general figures on domestic growth, see Coatsworth, *Growth Against Development*); also, Coatsworth, "Obstacles to Economic Growth in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," *American Historical Review* 83 (Feb. 1978): 80-100.

<sup>35</sup> Mexican Constitution of 1857, Article 72, Section X.

the surface automatic proprietors of the subsoil, thus surrendering the government's control over its subsoil resources, specifically charcoal and petroleum. The first law explicit to petroleum appeared in 1901, authorizing oil exploration on "vacant" lands, defined as areas controlled by the federal government. The law also allowed oil exploitation on riverbeds and coastal lands up to fifty miles from shores, both under federal jurisdiction. Additionally, the law "granted the right of way through private lands" as needed. The second petroleum law of 1909 declared that oil was the "exclusive property" of the surface owner, following the principle established in the mining law of 1884. Such legislation, then, encouraged oil companies to buy large extensions of land in rich petroleum areas. The benefitted were gigantic for, in addition to their oil business, they became land speculators and made generous profit from their real estate subsidiaries.

Although many foreigners invested in the Mexican oil industry, the two most important figures in the early history of oil production in Veracruz were Edward L. Doheny from the United States and Weetman Pearson from Great Britain. Doheny arrived in Veracruz in 1901 and found hundreds of "bubbling springs of oil" scattered through La Huasteca. He immediately purchased two haciendas west of Tampico, El Tullillo and Chapacao, covering 181,496 hecateres of land and created the Huasteca Petroleum Company.<sup>36</sup> But Porfirio Díaz and his advisors promoted Sir Weetman Pearson's interests above others. Mexican politicians encouraged economic development without surrendering to American businessmen's domination, which is why they favored

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<sup>36</sup> Santiago, *Ecology of Oil*, 64. Also, Ansell, Martin. *Oil Baron of the Southwest: Edward L. Doheny and the Development of the Oil Industry in California and Mexico*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998; also, Margaret Leslie Davis, *Dark Side of Fortune: Triumph and Scandal in the Life of Oil Tycoon Edward L. Doheny* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

British investors like Pearson. A construction engineer with no prior experience in the oil industry, Sir Weetman ultimately formed the largest oil company in Mexico, Compañía Mexicana de Petróleo El Águila.<sup>37</sup>

By 1901, Pearson had men exploring the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Tabasco, where he immediately started to buy and lease land. He negotiated the purchase of numerous large estates in the isthmus and started buying others. In Veracruz, Tabasco, and Campeche, the Pearson firm owned 250 000 hectares (ca. 600,000 acres) and leased and additional 120 000 (300,000 acres) of oil lands.<sup>38</sup> By 1906, Pearson's engineering company received a fifty-year contract all national land, lakes, and lagoons in the state of Veracruz, "plus duty-free import of machinery, free export of oil found on subject lands, tax exemptions, and a pipeline concession."<sup>39</sup> In exchange, the company had to deposit 40,000 pesos to the federal government, install a refinery, spend 800,000 pesos in exploration, file reports, and allow government inspection.

The railways, mining, and public utility industries, all of which were dominated by American capital, greatly stimulated domestic consumption of oil products. Edward Doheny, who was an experienced oilman himself—he had discovered the first Mexican oil field in El Ébano, San Luis Potosí—created the Huasteca Petroleum Company and built an experimental refinery in northern Veracruz. He persuaded the Mexican Central

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, "Domestic Politics," 388.

<sup>38</sup> J.A. Spender, *Weetman Pearson: First Viscount Cowdray, 1856-1927* (New York, 1977); Desmond Young, *Member for Mexico: A Biography of Weetman Pearson, First Viscount Cowdray* (London: 1966); Priscilla Connolly. *El contratista de Don Porfirio: Obras públicas, deuda, y desarrollo desigual* (Mexico: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1997); Andrew Godley, Lisa Bud Frierman, and Judith Wale. "Weetman Pearson in Mexico and the Emergence of a British Oil Major 1901-1919." *Business History Review* 84:2 (Summer 2010): 275-303.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, *Oil*, 403.



Railroad, another U.S. enterprise, to convert its locomotives from coal to fuel oil. After all, he had already introduced the petroleum-fueled steam engine to the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads. Doheny also convinced the local governments of Guadalajara, Morelia, Durango, Puebla, Chihuahua, Tampico, and Mexico City to pave their streets with asphalt, a product derived from petroleum.<sup>40</sup>

Before the arrival of foreign oil companies, four types of land ownership coexisted in Veracruz: big latifundia with little and medium-size haciendas and ranches, federal property, *condueñazgos*, and communal tenures.<sup>41</sup> Some plots were 100 000 hectares, while microunits were only two or three hectares. In the indigenous areas some *condueñazgos* remained, as well as a number of communal lands that were spared during the privatization of the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> Petroleum exploitation disrupted these traditional patterns of land possession. Since the early 1910s oil companies leased and bought large areas of land from big landowners, like the Peláez family in northern Veracruz.<sup>43</sup> They also obtained properties through violence and coercion, especially from

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<sup>40</sup> Santiago, *Ecology of Oil*, 63.

<sup>41</sup> For details on landownership in Veracruz, see Frans J. Schryer, "Peasants and the Law: A History of Land Tenure and Conflict in the Huasteca," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18:2 (1986): 283-311; Roberto Hernández Elizondo, "Propietarios, especuladores y renta petrolera en las regiones del Golfo de México (1900-1926)." *Sotavento* 5 (2000); for details on *condueñazgos* in Veracruz see, Emilio Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico* (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> For land disentailment in Veracruz during the nineteenth century see, Michael Ducey, "Liberal Theory and Peasant Practice: Land and Power in Northern Veracruz, Mexico," in *Liberals, the Church, and Indian Peasants: Liberal Reform and Corporate Challenge in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, ed. Robert H. Jackson (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1997); Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided*.

<sup>43</sup> For a thorough analysis on the role that medium and large landowners played in the process of oil exploitation, see Hernández Elizondo, "Propietarios," 41-2; Ana María Serna, *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural en la Faja de Oro: petróleo, revolución y sociedad en el norte de Veracruz, 1910-1928* (México: Instituto Mora, 2008); Jonathan Brown,

the hands of small mestizo peasants. Lastly, starting in 1917, oil companies were no longer entitled to buy government lands, but they did receive concessions and leases through formal agreements with the Ministry of Communications and Public Works (Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas, SCOP).

According to constitutional article 27, the Mexican “nation” is in charge of administering the territory and the national property through the state’s right to expropriate, to grant land, and to administer natural resources. These natural resources are never available for private ownership. In other words, the nation grants exploitation rights, not property rights. Foreign oil companies, then, could not own lands that were part of the “federal zones,” they could only lease them; and, although they could buy and lease territory from private owners, those lands were always subject to expropriation for the common good if they had been acquired after 1917.

Under this new legislation, many Mexican landowners agreed to lease their properties to these companies, while others decided to sell. Either way, companies had to obtain drilling concessions from the government, for landowners were no longer owners of the subsoil. Contracts usually obligated the renter to drill within a certain amount of time and offered landowners an annual rental and a royalty, but possession of isolated terrains was unusual and many residents did not hold property titles. The oil pioneers, then, “had to go to Tuxpan and other towns to check the civil records for proper titles.”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, these different kinds of property regimes produced complications for the companies, the government, and the landowners. For example, the plot Juan Felipe, a

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“Why Foreign Oil Companies Shifted Their Production from Mexico to Venezuela in the 1920s,” *The American Historical Review* 90: 2 (April 1985): 171-252.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Oil and Revolution*, 107.

condueñazgo in northern Veracruz, had two groups of owners, both of which wished to drill for petroleum. When the co-owners could agree neither on the “the extension of their rights, nor on the best way to exploit those oil reserves...” President Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) established that he would provide the rights of exploitation to the group that could demonstrate 75% ownership of the plot. A series of factors made this case particularly complicated. Among other considerations, the fact was that there was not one proprietor, but two groups of owners “whose rights began [in 1826], and who were gathered in voluntary communities and continued this system through a series of inheritances that [were] undivided until then.” Because one of the groups had allegedly sold its rights to the Huasteca Co. and demonstrated the ownership of 75% of the plot, the federal government decided to grant exploitation rights to the oil company.<sup>45</sup> Luis Cabrera, who incidentally was the attorney for the second group, argued that the federal government had provided such rights because Huasteca Co. “had loaned the ‘risible’ amount of ten million pesos to the federal government in 1923.”<sup>46</sup> This is one of the more representative examples of the trouble that oilmen and lessors encountered when trying to engage in these transactions.

The postrevolutionary regime granted drilling concessions in an effort to obtain tax revenue and continue to satisfy the internal market, but without allowing foreign enterprises to obtain full ownership of Mexican territory. However, even under legislation unfriendly to foreign property rights in Mexico, oil companies were able to secure,

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<sup>45</sup> Luis Cabrera and S. Valenzuela, *Juicio de Amparo promovido por la Sociedad Civil “Condueñazgo de Juan Felipe”, contra actos de la Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo ante el Juez Cuarto Supernumerario del Distrito Federal. Alegatos en la Audiencia de Derecho. Sentencia Pronunciada (México, November, 1924), 5-7.*

<sup>46</sup> *Idem.* 7.

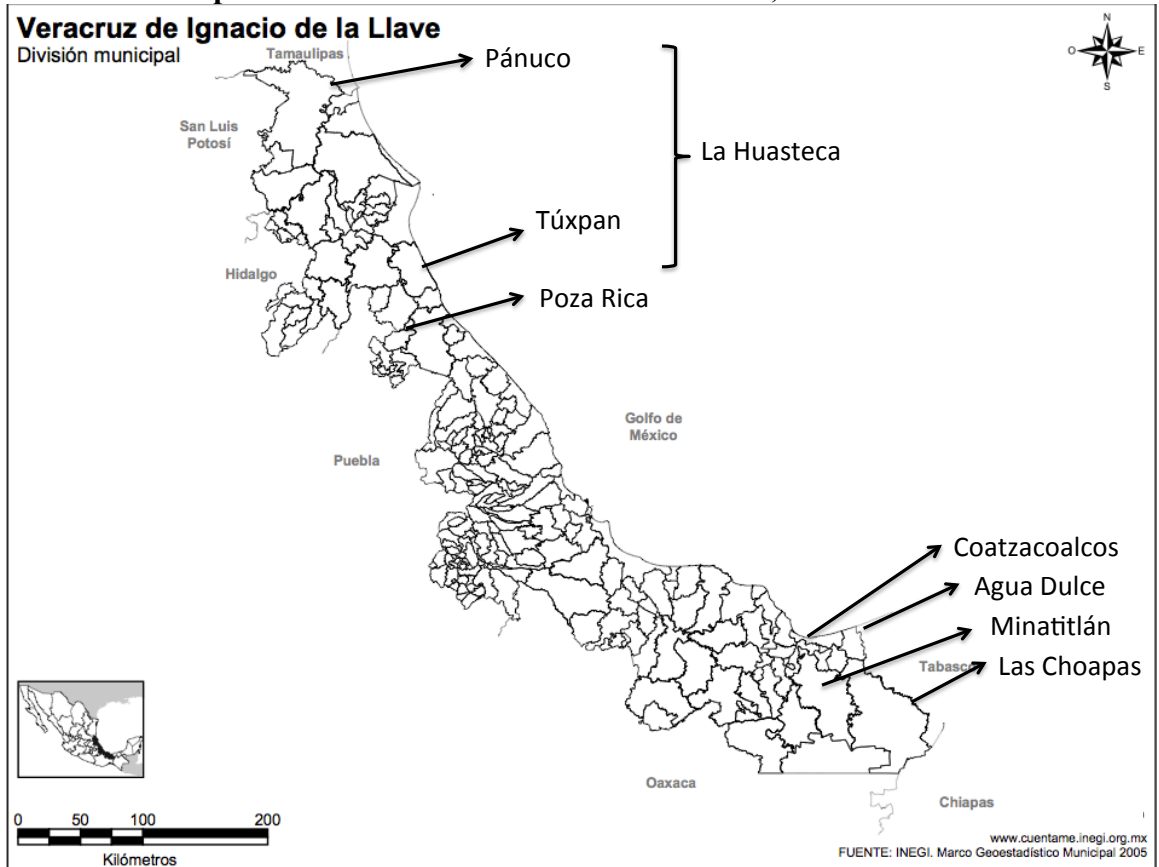
through buying or leasing, millions of hectares between 1902 and 1938. Roberto Hernández has calculated that oil companies controlled ca. 2 306 745 million hectares by 1917. Merrill Rippy registers that the companies leased 2 690 159 hectares and owned 677 553 more by 1920. The 1925 Oil Law mandated foreign oil companies to register their property. The total titles covered 6 226 063, more than twice the 1920 amount. Lorenzo Meyer found that by 1937, they registered titles for a little under 7 million hectares. The Petroleum Department registered over 10 million by the time of expropriation.<sup>47</sup>

Oil exploitation in Mexico, then, was mostly performed by companies from the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands until 1938, the year of the Mexican oil nationalization. The first cities to see the oil industry grow were Tampico, Tamaulipas—which was already a thriving port town before petroleum—and Minatitlán, in southern Veracruz, where British enterprise El Águila opened the first refinery in 1908. Other oil camps that turned into towns and cities were Coatzacoalcos, Agua Dulce, Panuco, Las Choapas, and later Poza Rica (see Map 2).

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<sup>47</sup> Hernández Elizondo, “Propietarios”; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*; Haber, Maurer, and Razo, “When the Law Does Not Matter.”

**Map 2- Areas of Oil Production in Veracruz, 1900-1940**



Source: Author's own elaboration on map by: INEGI. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, Mexico. <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx>

### **Peopling the Oil Fields of Veracruz**

The rapid development of the oil industry in Mexico required an increase in the labor force of the petroleum zones. Therefore, labor agents began traveling throughout the country to attract migrant workers to La Huasteca and southern Veracruz. Thousands of men and women moved to those regions starting in the 1910s to work for the oil companies. Single derricks became large camps where Mexican laborers and foreign overseers lived and worked. Many of the people who contributed to the growth of the oil industry in Veracruz came from other areas of Mexico, but it is difficult to assess the

exact ages, sex, and places of origin of these migrant populations, since there are very few demographic indicators that provide specific data. However, areas that had experienced the development of the oil industry in previous years, such as Tampico and Minatitlán, had already witnessed an important population rise from 1900 to 1920. A large number of people arrived to Tampico through the 1910s. For example, the 1910 census registered 23,452 inhabitants, while seven years later, there were 40,000 people living in the city, which represents an 8% annual population growth during that period.<sup>48</sup> Workers left their homes in San Luis Potosí, Coahuila, Mexico City, the Port of Veracruz, Guanajuato, and Guadalajara to take jobs in Tampico as stevedores, railroad workers, blacksmiths, mechanics, and bureaucrats.<sup>49</sup>

The men and women who arrived to the oil fields in different regions of Veracruz came mainly from nearby states. Those who migrated to the Huasteca—Túxpan, Pánuco, and later Poza Rica—usually arrived from Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí, and Querétaro. Those who looked for work in southern Veracruz—Minatitlán, Coatzacoalcos, and Las Choapas—came from Oaxaca, Tabasco, and Chiapas. These laborers were from three major groups: experienced oil workers migrating between fields; laborers from different industries (railroads, ports); and unskilled workers of direct rural extraction.<sup>50</sup> Several

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<sup>48</sup> Lief Adleson, “Historia social de los obreros industriales en Tampico, 1906-1919,” Ph.D. Diss., El Colegio de México, 1982, 91; also, Carrillo-Dewar, Ivonne. *Industria petrolera y desarrollo capitalista en el norte de Veracruz, 1900-1990*. México: Universidad Veracruzana, 1993.

<sup>49</sup> Idem, 92.

<sup>50</sup> For more on migration to the oil areas see, Julio Valdivieso Castillo, *Historia del movimiento sindical petrolero en Minatitlán*, Veracruz (México, 1963); Olvera, “Los trabajadores ante la nacionalización petrolera. El caso de Poza Rica (1937-1940),” *Anuario V* (1988); also Jaime Preciado Coronado, *Industria petrolera y movimientos sociales regionales* (Guadalajara, Méx: Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara, 1991); Martín Gerardo Aguilar Sánchez, “La organización petrolera y la cultura sindical en

hundred who also arrived to these areas did not work directly in the oil industry, but provided services and engaged in commerce.<sup>51</sup> Many laborers traveled to Veracruz with their families, so the population growth included men, women, and children.

Table 1 shows the population growth in Veracruz, plus an increase in population density, which also accounts for the growing tensions surrounding land possession in the state, as will be explained in the following section. From 1921 to 1930, the state saw a demographic surge of 217 998 people. Despite the fact that, during following decade the growth was only slightly larger (at 241 405), much of this demographic growth focused on the oil areas of the state, as Table 2 shows. Coatzacoalcos, Minatitlán, Tuxpan, and Coatzintla (later Poza Rica), were some of the oldest and most productive oil towns in the country, which attracted large numbers of people during the production peak in Mexico, between 1920 and 1940. Indeed, from 1921 to 1930, 4 721 people arrived to Coatzacoalcos, constituting a 62.5% addition to the 7 550 people that were already there. The following decade the city saw an increase of 77%. In 1930, Minatitlán had 41% more people living there than it did in 1921, while by 1940 the increase had gone up to 57%. As for Tuxpan, the increase was of 38.5% between 1921 and 1930, and then slowed

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Minatitlán, 1920-1945,” *Sotavento* 6 (1999): 59-90; Adleson, “Historia social”; Adleson, “Causalidad y conciencia”; Olvera, “The Rise and Fall of Union Democracy”; Olvera, “Origen social, condiciones de vida”; Brown, “Acting for Themselves.”

<sup>51</sup> There were countless other industries in Veracruz that attracted laborers. See, Moisés T. de la Peña, *Veracruz económico* (México: 1946); Aurora Gómez Galvarriato, coord. *La industria textil en México* (México: Instituto Mora/Colmex/Colmich/IIH-UNAM, 1999); Odile Hoffmann and Emilia Velázquez, coord. *Las llanuras costeras de Veracruz. La lenta construcción de regiones* (Xalapa, México: Universidad Veracruzana/L’Institute Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération, 1994); Susana Córdova Santamaría, *Café y sociedad en Huatusco, Veracruz: formación de una cultura cafetalera (1870-1930)* (México: CONACULTA, 2005); Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided*; Aguilar Sánchez and Ortiz Escamilla. For more on women in the oil fields see Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*.

down to 14% from 1930 to 1940. Coatzintla’s demographic acceleration occurred between 1930 and 1940 because the Poza Rica fields—the largest and most productive in Mexican history—were discovered in 1936. That decade saw 8 654 arrive to Coatzintla, which constituted almost an 80% population increase. In general, the 1930s saw the largest population increase in all oil-producing areas. Such population continued to grow during the 1940s, though not at the same accelerated pace, as Graph 1 shows.

**Table 1-Population Growth in Veracruz 1920-1940**

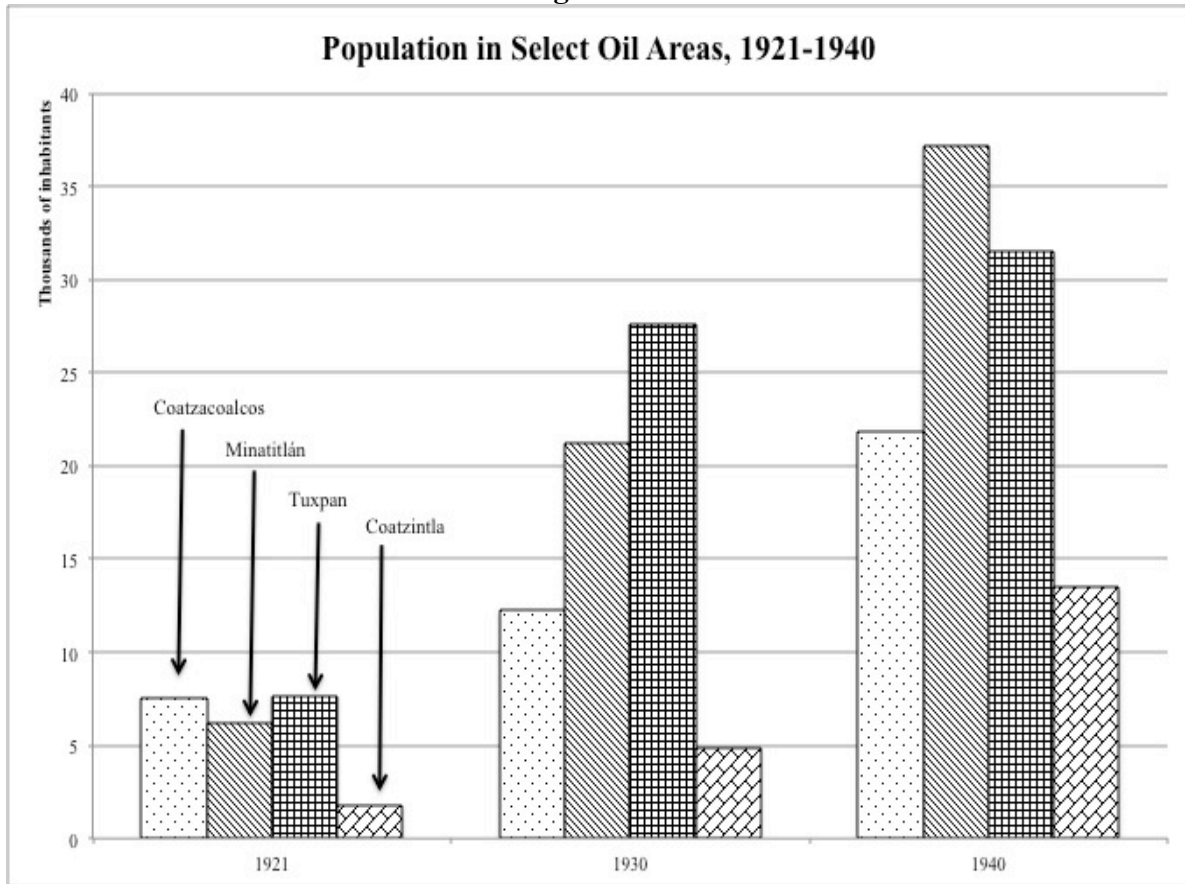
<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Population of Veracruz</b>	<b>Number of Municipalities in Veracruz</b>	<b>Population Density in the state</b>
1921	1 159 935	186	15.69 pop/km <sup>2</sup>
1930	1 377 933	181	19.16 pop/km <sup>2</sup>
1940	1 619 338	197	22.62 pop/km <sup>2</sup>

**Table 2- Population in Select Oil Areas**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Coatzacoalcos</b>	<b>Minatitlán</b>	<b>Túxpan</b>	<b>Coatzintla</b>
1921	7 550	6 204	7 677	1 816
1930	12 271	21 273	27 603	4 825
1940	21 816	37 182	31 539	13 479



Figure 1



Sources: Author's own elaboration based on: Censo de Población 1921 Veracruz, (México: INEGI); Censo de Población 1930 Veracruz, (México: INEGI); Censo de Población 1940 Veracruz, (México: INEGI); also Feliciano García Aguirre, "Tierra y sociedad en el siglo XX," in *Historia general de Veracruz*, coord. by Martín Aguilar Sánchez and Juan Ortiz Escamilla (México: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 2011) 474-526.

Foreigners also arrived in increasing numbers between the early 1900s until the mid-1930s and contributed to a varied demographic landscape, as well as to the complications arising from struggles over property. Once the oil boom was on in the early 1920s, the lease-takers and speculators arrived in large numbers. Some, as Jonathan Brown has shown, were veterans of the Alaska gold rush and others had experience in the oil booms of Texas and Kansas.<sup>52</sup> U.S. skilled and unskilled workers, as well as

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *Oil*, 345.

wildcatters, spent a few months in a particular oil field and then moved on to the next.

The representatives of different oil companies hired Mexican and U.S. lawyers who knew Spanish and specialized in perfecting oil leases.

Migrants from diverse regions of Mexico arrived to Veracruz searching for jobs on the petroleum fields and in many cases took over lands that belonged to the oil companies. Such invasions occurred since the beginning of oil exploitation in Mexico during the 1910s. But while the number of people migrating to the oil regions of Veracruz increased later in that decade and throughout the twenties, so did the invasions and the formal agrarian petitions to the National Agrarian Commission.<sup>53</sup> In short, the types of land struggles that occurred in the first thirty years of oil production were directly related to this population growth, but also to the enforcement of the agrarian reform in those areas. Later they were also related to the proletarianization and union militancy of oil workers and the strength of their demands for housing.

A good example to illustrate the demographic changes and redistribution of space that the growth of the oil industry produced is Minatitlán. The workers and families who first arrived to the camp in southern Veracruz built small shacks with roofs made of palm

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<sup>53</sup> There is much written about agrarian laws in Veracruz, but surprisingly little about land invasions. For general information about property legislation in the state see, Heather Fowler Salamini, *Movilización campesina en Veracruz (1920-1938)* (México, Siglo XXI, 1979); Romana Falcón, *El agrarismo en Veracruz. La etapa radical (1928-1935)* (México: El Colegio de México, 1977); Falcón and Soledad García Morales, *La semilla en el surco*; Olivia Domínguez Pérez, *Política y movimientos sociales en el tejedismo* (Xalapa, México: Universidad Veracruzana, 1986); Hoffmann and Velázquez, *Las llanuras*; Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided*; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*; Serna, *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural*. For land takeovers in other regions: Barry Carr, "El Partido Comunista y la movilización agraria en la Laguna, 1920-1940: ¿una alianza obrero-campesina?," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 51:2 (1989); Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute*; Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*.

leaves and tied with the bark of different kinds of trees.<sup>54</sup> At first, the companies only provided modest shacks for the workers, even structures that were four columns and a roof. Soon, however, laborers began demanding better housing and El Águila had to comply, assigning specific areas for workers' colonies near the industrial complex. A place like Minatitlán, where the refinery attracted steady workforces and had infrastructure and material easily accessible for the construction of houses and public services, very soon became a thriving town and later a city, with traced streets, small stores, restaurants, barbershops, markets, and cantinas.

The onset of the petroleum industry attracted populations from all walks of life. Some were peasants and some were merchants; some were industrial workers, while others did not have a defined trade. In Agua Dulce, Puerto Mexico, for example, a group of people made a land petition over territory controlled by El Águila. The Agrarian Commission engineer in charge of the case declared that the inhabitants of Agua Dulce were “all peasants (agricultores) who currently work as laborers or day-workers in the oil fields because they do not have a land on which to work.” He continued by declaring that all the vecinos of the area were indeed “experienced peasants.”<sup>55</sup>

As we will see, land petitioners many times migrated to Veracruz in search for work in the oil fields but when they could not find a position or when they were laid off by the companies, stayed in the area and sought to become beneficiaries of the agrarian reform. The blurry line that separated socioeconomic groups in these regions—in other words, oil workers were peasants and peasants were oil workers—also affected the way

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<sup>54</sup> Pemex, *El petróleo de México* (México: Imprenta Pemex) 69.

<sup>55</sup> Report by the Local Agrarian Commission engineer. Agua Dulce, Puerto México, February, 1931. AGEV/CAM File 1384, Box 394.

in which lands were distributed, reflecting the increasingly stronger distinctions that the postrevolutionary government made between rural and industrial workers.

### **Land Struggles in the Oil Fields**

The onset of the petroleum industry attracted populations from all walks of life. Some were peasants and some were merchants; some were industrial workers, while others did not have a defined trade. As we will see, land petitioners many times migrated to Veracruz in search for work in the oil fields but when they could not find a position or when they were laid off by the companies, stayed in the area and sought to become beneficiaries of the agrarian reform. The blurry line that separated socioeconomic groups in these regions also affected the way in which lands were distributed. Many workers from rural origins migrated to the oil areas looking for jobs that would allow them to gather enough capital to return to their places of origin and continue toiling the land. Laborers from various industries and cities had sometimes the goal of earning enough money to open small businesses. But another large group arrived to Veracruz and decided to stay. As a result, even before the peak of oil production and immigration to the oil-producing areas of Veracruz, foreign companies were in constant conflict with Mexican settlers, which would affect the development of the oil industry in various ways.

In 1920, for example, El Águila leased 800 square meters of federal land from the Ministry of Public Works (SCOP) in Tampamachoco, northern Veracruz. Several months later, company executives complained to the federal government that they had not been able to occupy the area because a group of squatters refused to leave. President Álvaro Obregón ordered the port captain to remove the invaders and allow El Águila to begin the exploration and drilling of oil. By mid 1921, however, the port captain had not taken

definitive action, and the federal zone kept on “being occupied by individuals who build houses without permission from the government or this Company.”<sup>56</sup> El Águila executives wrote further complaints to SCOP, to president Obregón, and to the Minister of War demanding the invaders’ removal. Government officials and local authorities nonetheless remained cautious since minor employees of the company, together with the barrack’s chief, had violently expelled two families from houses that, according to one El Águila manager, were “in the federal zone, which is not Company’s property.” These families had not only lost their houses, but also several of their possessions, and were now reclaiming 1,500 pesos in damages.<sup>57</sup>

After El Águila employees, together with the barrack’s chief, removed the two families from their homes, a legal battle ensued. It was the zenith of a long conflict between the company and the neighbors that had started several years before, when British drillers arrived to an area that was already occupied. In fact, by 1920 more than 150 families had already built a whole town, including a market.

The heads of the two families that had been expelled from their homes in Tampamachoco, together with the rest of the squatters who were in danger of losing their property, hired attorney Alfredo Quesnel to begin a judicial review (*juicio de amparo*) against president Obregón, the SCOP, the Minister of War, the Minister of Internal Revenue, and Tampamachoco’s port captain. The argument they presented to the court was that El Águila, in collusion with those authorities, was violating numerous articles of

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<sup>56</sup> R. Montes to the Secretaría de Obras Públicas, August 26, 1922. Archivo Histórico de Petróleos Mexicanos, (hereafter Pemex Archive) Box 617, File 16910.

<sup>57</sup> Port Captain to H.H. Hallatt. August 30, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910. Also, Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Presidentes-Álvaro Obregón Salido (hereafter AGN/AOS), File 803-e-10.

the 1917 Federal Constitution by trying to expel the *vecinos* from their lands.<sup>58</sup> The intention was to overturn the official orders so they could stay in Tampamachoco. Quesnel argued that the attempts at removing the squatters, who were “peaceful and honest workers,” were acts only suitable for the “farthest regions of Africa, and not characteristic of a civilized Nation that regulates its actions based on the culture of the civilized nations of the Universe.”<sup>59</sup> He further defended his clients by citing article 14 of the 1917 constitution, which guarantees that no one can be deprived of life, liberty, possessions, and property without due process. He also cited article 16, which declares that no citizen can be molested in his or her person, family, domicile, papers, and possessions except by virtue of a written order by the competent authority. Lastly, he declared his shock at the fact that “El Águila Petroleum Company is the only one with rights to control the Federal Zone at will... [this is] a violation of the fraction I of Article 27 of the Constitution.” Despite Quesnel’s efforts, the amparo was denied.<sup>60</sup>

The Tampamachoco land invaders were a mix of El Águila workers, small peasants, artisans, and dockworkers. During the legal process that ensued, they argued as a unified group through their lawyer, stating that they had settled there long before the British arrived and that they owned houses inside the federal zone in which they had “peacefully lived for over ten years.”<sup>61</sup> El Águila managers stated that none of the “land invaders,” except for very few exceptions, were workers of the company, so they had no

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<sup>58</sup> Acta Juicio de Amparo, Tuxpam Tribunal, Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

<sup>59</sup> Acta de Juicio de Amparo. Alfredo Quesnel to C. Juez Segundo de Distrito Numerario, April 22, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

<sup>60</sup> T. P. Rosado, Secretary of District Judge to Port Captain of Tuxpam. May 18, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

<sup>61</sup> Alfredo Quesnel to Álvaro Obregón. Tuxpam, Veracruz. November 16, 1921. AGN/AOS, File 808-T-8.

obligation to provide housing for them or their families.<sup>62</sup> El Águila's own lawyer disagreed and declared that the company's workers would "constitute the majority of those affected by these negotiations." He also requested additional information about how the squatters built their homes because "apparently, in several occasions, the houses that exist in the federal zone have been put up with material that the Company has provided expressly for that purpose."<sup>63</sup>

The Tampamachoco case is one that illustrates the types of conflicts that followed the arrival of foreign oil companies to Veracruz. There are several elements to consider. The first is that the "squatters" were in fact residents of the area who had settled there in 1913, nine years before the company signed the lease with the Mexican government—something that would occur in many cases throughout the first three decades of oil exploitation in Mexico. The second relates to the access that the company had to the federal zone, which, according to the residents' lawyer violated several articles of the 1917 constitution. The most offensive aspect of this was the territorial control that the British capitalists were able to maintain over Mexican territory. The third and most important aspect that we should draw from the Tampamachoco case now is how confused El Águila managers were about the identity of the "invaders." Many had probably, at one time or another, worked for the company. Others had different trades or were small peasants or merchants. In short, they were "indefinable." This would be a common phenomenon in the history of oil exploitation in Mexico, even after 1938.

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<sup>62</sup> Letter to Francisco Diez Barroso, May 12, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

<sup>63</sup> M. Flores Jr. to Luis Alvarado. Tuxan, Veracruz. October 16, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

Whether it was one man or an entire town, oil companies and local authorities were unable to shape sound legal arguments against land “invaders” because they could not attest whether these were oil workers (who would have housing rights per the labor laws of the time), or if they were people who engaged in other trades and therefore had no relationship to the company. As we will see, in several cases the invaders were both oil workers and small peasants or merchants. The point is, however, that the efforts and difficulties of categorizing individuals by socioeconomic activity, both by the government and the companies, resulted in hazy legal cases, citizens’ complaints, and conflicts over land in these areas.

For example, as early as 1916, forty indigenous families of a plot called El Gavilán, near Minatitlán, made an agrarian petition over lands owned by Pearson and Son that were later transferred to the Compañía Mexicana de Bienes Inmuebles, the real estate subsidiary of El Águila Petroleum Company. A man who said to have been living in the area for many years asked that, as part of the agrarian grant, authorities also allowed him to open a small brick factory. The engineer of the Agrarian Commission later demonstrated that the man had been a “worker for the Minatitlán refinery” and that he was now “attempting to open a brick factory financed by [private individuals]” and was not eligible for an agrarian grant.<sup>64</sup> The man’s request was denied.

Also in El Gavilán, agrarian authorities exchanged correspondence with El Águila managers in 1918 about a land petition that, if granted, would have affected the company’s interests in the area. El Águila reported that most petitioners were “of Chinese

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<sup>64</sup> F.J. Loyo to the Governor of Veracruz, March 9, 1916. Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz/Comisión Agraria Mixta (hereafter AGEV/CAM), El Gavilán, Municipality of Minatitlán, File 65.



origin or born in other areas of the country and... did not constitute a population center,” which made them ineligible to become beneficiaries of the agrarian reform. “The signers Arturo Lon, J. Ch. Pen, Suju Lon, Ah. Lung, and Antonio Tap,” said a representative for El Águila, “are undoubtedly Chinese, as clearly indicated by their names.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, oil managers accused the petitioners of being a mix of peasants, fishermen, and small merchants who had settled in the company’s lands. The petitioners denied these accusations and invoked their rights “provided by the [agrarian] law” to make the request, supported by the Agrarian Commission engineer who recommended that the lands be granted.<sup>66</sup> “Otherwise,” he declared, “we will never know for whom we fought and when our bloody battle will result in social redemption, and our country will never advance despite so much sacrifice.”<sup>67</sup>

Despite the difficulties in identifying the exact origin and occupation of most “invaders” or petitioners during this period, the fact that these areas were so close to the oil fields meant that many of those who requested lands to the agrarian commissions were already working for the oil companies, though did not consider themselves industrial workers. Indeed, a case in Minatitlán shows just how entangled these two worlds were. In May of 1916, a man named Teodoro Ávila wrote to the governor of Veracruz to say that he, together with his family, had migrated to the region to work in the refinery. Ávila and other workers built “humble shacks where [they] could spend peaceful and quiet time with [their] families... saving the money that would otherwise go toward renting a

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<sup>65</sup> Jacinto Pereyra to the Agrarian Commission. Córdoba, Veracruz, April 6, 1918. AGEV/CAM El Gavilán, Municipality of Minatitlán, File 65.

<sup>66</sup> Ruperto Hernández and others to the Local Agrarian Commission,, April 14, 1915. AGEV/CAM, El Gavilán, Municipality of Minatitlán, Box 68.

<sup>67</sup> Local Agrarian Commission to National Agrarian Commission, Córdoba, Veracruz, April 5, 1918. AGEV/CAM El Gavilán, Municipality of Minatitlán, Box 68.

room.” The shacks, however, were located in territory owned by El Águila whose managers initially allowed the workers to settle there. Ávila now declared that he wished to appeal to the “great and wise laws that the Constitutionalist Government has dictated in favor of the proletariat” because El Águila wanted to vacate the workers and their families unless they signed a contract that, in Ávila’s words, “equaled slavery.”

The specific law that Ávila referred to was a decree signed by governor Cándido Aguilar in 1915, which established, “all renters or day workers (jornaleros)... on a rustic estate (finca rústica) will be allowed to enjoy dwellings without paying rent.” Supported by this legislation, then, Ávila and the other petitioners demanded justice because the law protected them “both as day workers on a rustic estate, and as workers in a Company.” They requested the expansion of the village of Minatitlán because they would not be able to rebuild their shacks someplace else and, given that their dwellings were “located in terrains that could very well belong to the town,” they expected the governor to aid them.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, because many of those involved in these cases were from rural extraction, it is very possible that they had already been peasants before obtaining positions in the industry. In fact, peons working in the oil fields—as opposed to more skilled workers employed in the refineries—had been abandoning their work during harvest times for years, to the chagrin of foreign managers. “When harvests come, they leave their work, because some of them are owners of small plots which they sow for

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<sup>68</sup> Teodoro Ávila and others to governor Cándido Aguilar, Minatitlán, Veracruz, May 17, 1916. AGEV/CAM, Minatitlán File 29, Box 28.

their own benefit,” reported a labor inspector in 1920.<sup>69</sup> What is also clear from these cases is that the demographic pressure in the oil areas pushed oil laborers to ask for land grants. Even in places that required a more permanent labor force, like in the Minatitlan refinery, oil companies were not equipped to handle all the new arrivals.

In 1917, for example, a group of workers declared that they had been living in Tacoteno, a plot next to the Minatitlán refinery, between 5 and 10 years and complained about the lack of terrains on where to build their own shacks. “A most lamentable absence,” they said “prejudicial and abnormal [sic] for the natives, but much more sensitive [sic] for the workers who are immigrants or outsiders, many of whom are signing this petition [and represent] the affluence of population that day by day is increasing.” According to the neighbors, an expropriation would be “beneficial for agriculture because... those [were] good lands for planting, unlike the nearby terrains which [were] swampy.”<sup>70</sup> In later correspondence, it was left clear that the signers were “in their majority workers for the refinery”<sup>71</sup> calling themselves “peasant neighbors,” who were asking for an ejido grant.<sup>72</sup> A representative of El Águila subsidiary Compañía Mexicana de Bienes Inmuebles wrote that in Minatitlán did not exist, nor had there ever existed, population that were dedicated to agriculture. “Fourteen of the most respected

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<sup>69</sup> Luis G. Salas to Froilan Alvarez del Castillo. Minatitlan, Veracruz. July 3, 1917. AGEV/CAM, Municipality of Minatitlan, Box 29, File 28.

<sup>70</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>71</sup> Letter to Gonzalo Vázquez Vela. Minatitlán, Veracruz. AGEV/CAM, Municipality of Minatitlan, Box 29, File 28.

<sup>72</sup> Letter to the President to the National Agrarian Commission. Minatitlán, Veracruz. October 24, 1917. AGEV/CAM, Municipality of Minatitlan, Box 29, File 28.

residents of the city declare,” he said, “that Tacoteno has never been considered for agriculture.”<sup>73</sup>

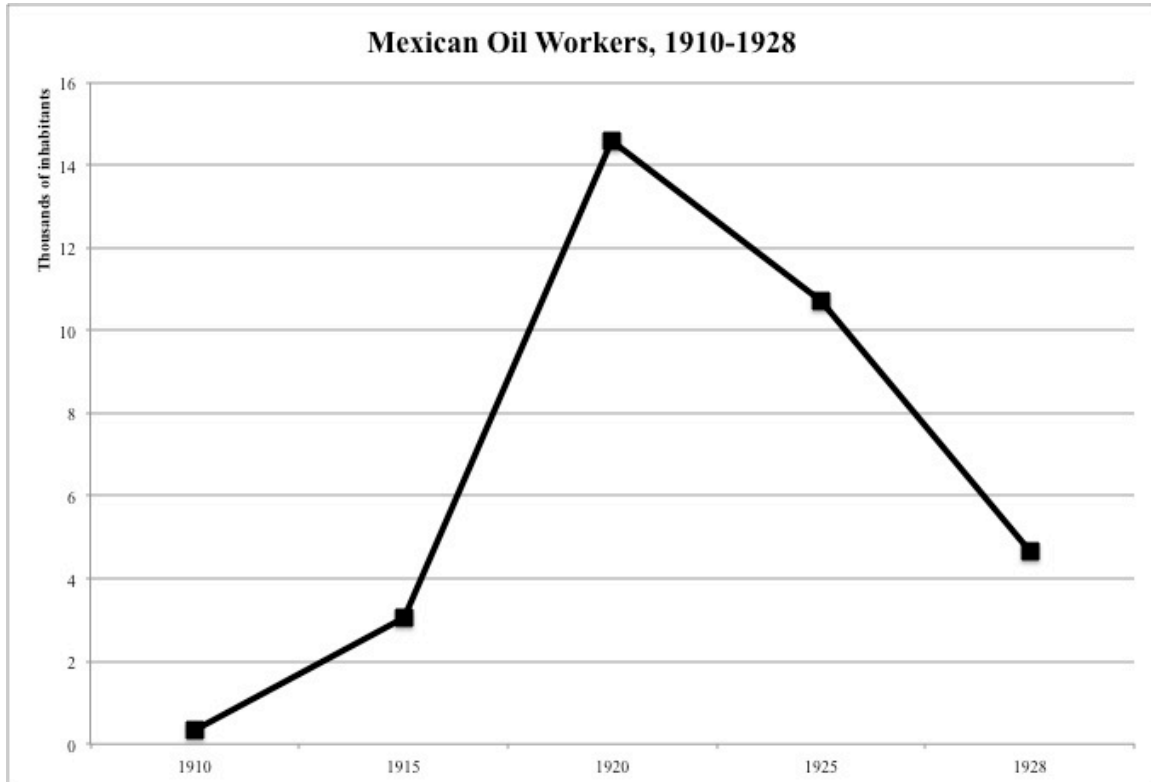
Many of these cases coincide with a moment of crisis in the Mexican oil industry. After having reached a peak in production in the early 1920s, output began declining and companies had to lay off thousands of workers. In part as consequence of this downturn in production, men who had migrated to Veracruz and found themselves out of jobs after the oil boom of the early twenties were suddenly in need for lands. As shown in Figure 2, between 1915 and 1920, oil companies went from employing ca. 2 500 workers to a little over 14 000 in 1921. By 1925, the oil industry had laid off approximately 2 000 laborers. By 1928, more than 10 000 people were left without jobs in the petroleum-producing areas of Mexico. This decrease in demand produced an interesting phenomenon that Ana María Serna describes in her work. Serna suggests that the unemployment resulting from the decline of production in the oil industry produced a new class of peasantry. In other words, those workers who were left unemployed by the oil crisis returned to the fields and became campesinos.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Jacinto Pereyra to the National Agrarian Commission. Minatitlán, Veracruz. January 5, 1918. AGEV/CAM, Municipality of Minatitlan, Box 29, File 28.

<sup>74</sup> Serna, *La vida rural*, 299-332.

Figure 2



Source: Author's own elaboration based: Ana María Serna, *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural en la Faja de Oro*, 190.

As oil workers tried to use the opportunities provided by the agrarian reform during the unemployment peak in the late twenties, they continued to make petitions through the thirties. In early 1938, El Águila representatives complained to the National Agrarian Commission that many who had petitioned for lands in Santa Alejandrina, near the Minatitlán refinery, were “oil workers who receive salaries for their services.” With his letter, he also sent a document that demonstrated that many solicitors were indeed paid workers, “completely foreign to agriculture and... because they are not peasants, according to the Agrarian Code, they have no right to obtain ejidos.”<sup>75</sup> People who were

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<sup>75</sup> Miguel Ángel Cordera to CAM, February 22, 1938. AGEV/CAM Santa Alejandrina, Box700, File 3064.

now working for the oil companies were many of rural extraction, and in numerous instances contemplated the opportunity to request lands, despite the fact that either they already had paying jobs, or had recently been laid-off by the companies (but were still considered industrial workers by the agrarian laws).<sup>76</sup> Indeed, many individuals continued to work both as peasants *and* as oil workers, despite the pressure that labor unions and confederations put onto individuals to define their socioeconomic activity.

New discoveries of oil deposits were being made in the early thirties, oil production began to increase, and companies started looking for laborers again. At the same time, labor unions recruited in cities and the countryside, while the cardenista government continued its effort to categorize, organize, and regulate workers' lives. Laborers themselves started to frame their defense for land through different terms than the ones they had used a decade before—terms that reflected an increasing working-class identity. This, however, does not mean that they resigned themselves to a landless destiny as proletarians. On the contrary, they still attempted to obtain grants and considered it their prerogative, both to fulfill their need for housing and their desire for agricultural land.

The cases presented in this chapter are good examples of the type of transformation that was occurring in these areas. In the Minatitlan case outlined above, for example, the engineer from the Agrarian Commission assigned to the area reported, “most people arriving to the refinery have been either peasants or fishermen...” who

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<sup>76</sup> For employment rates see Serna, *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural*, 190; for increase in production, Haber, Maurer, and Razo, “When the Law.”

needed the land for their subsistence and could certainly work the lands themselves.<sup>77</sup>

The engineer concluded that a land grant would help the native people of Minatitlan as well as the new arrivals “allowing the lives of the population to develop in a better way than that of the refinery workers for whom agriculture is the true occupation.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite the consistent difficulties that the companies and the National Agrarian Commission encountered when trying to establish the identity of petitioners, scholars have established that in fact peasants formed the largest occupational group that arrived to the oil fields in the 1920s and 30s. As shown in Table 3 and Figures 3 and 3(a), during the period between 1930 and 1940, a little over 48% of men who worked in the oil fields had been peasants or had rural origins before obtaining employment in the oil fields, while a small fraction (11.78%) had already been laborers in the petroleum industry. In the 1950s and 60s, the percentage of peasants waded considerably to almost 22%, while laborers with a background in the petroleum industry made up almost 44% at the time this data was gathered.

**Table 3- Occupational Origins of Oil Workers by Generation (1970s)**

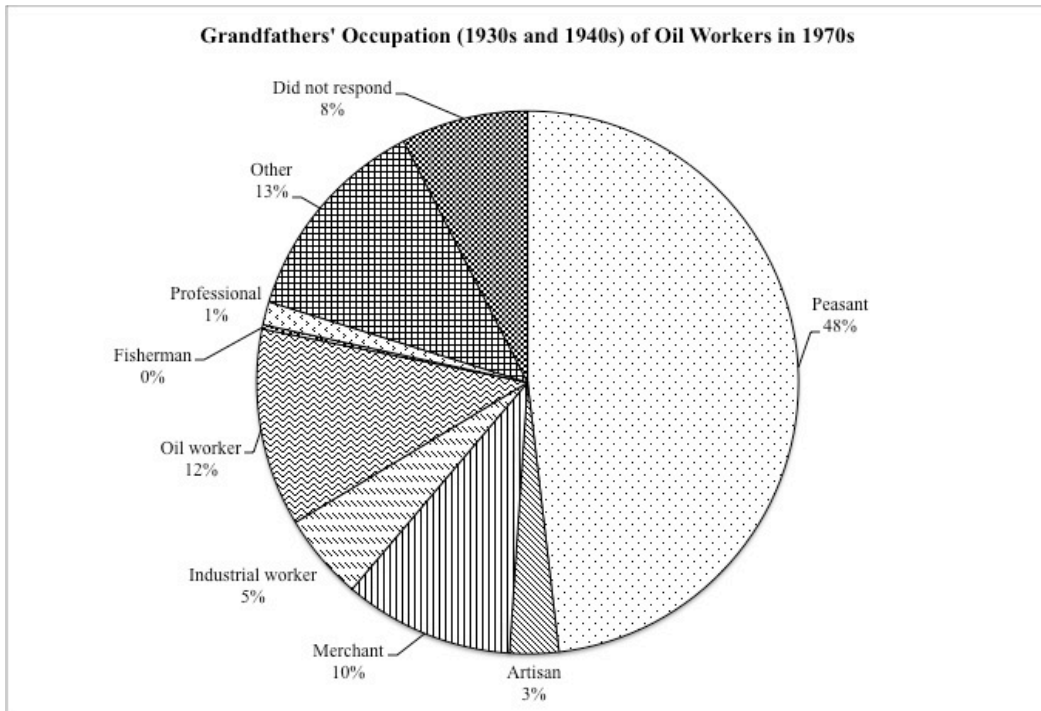
Occupation	Grandfather- National percentage (1930s-40s)	Father- National percentage (1950s-60s)
Peasant	48.15	21.86
Artisan	2.92	2.41
Merchant	10.15	9.04
Industrial worker	5.16	9.29
Oil Worker	11.78	43.98
Fishermen	.26	.26
Professional	1.38	2.32
Other	12.64	9.38

<sup>77</sup> Luis G. Salas to Secretary Vazquez Vela. Minatitlan, Veracruz, October 24, 1917. AGEV/CAM, Municipality of Minatitlan, Box 29, File 28.

<sup>78</sup> Report provided by Secretary Vazquez Vela. Minatitlan, Veracruz, December 29, 1917. AGEV/CAM, Municipality of Minatitlan, Box 29, File 28.

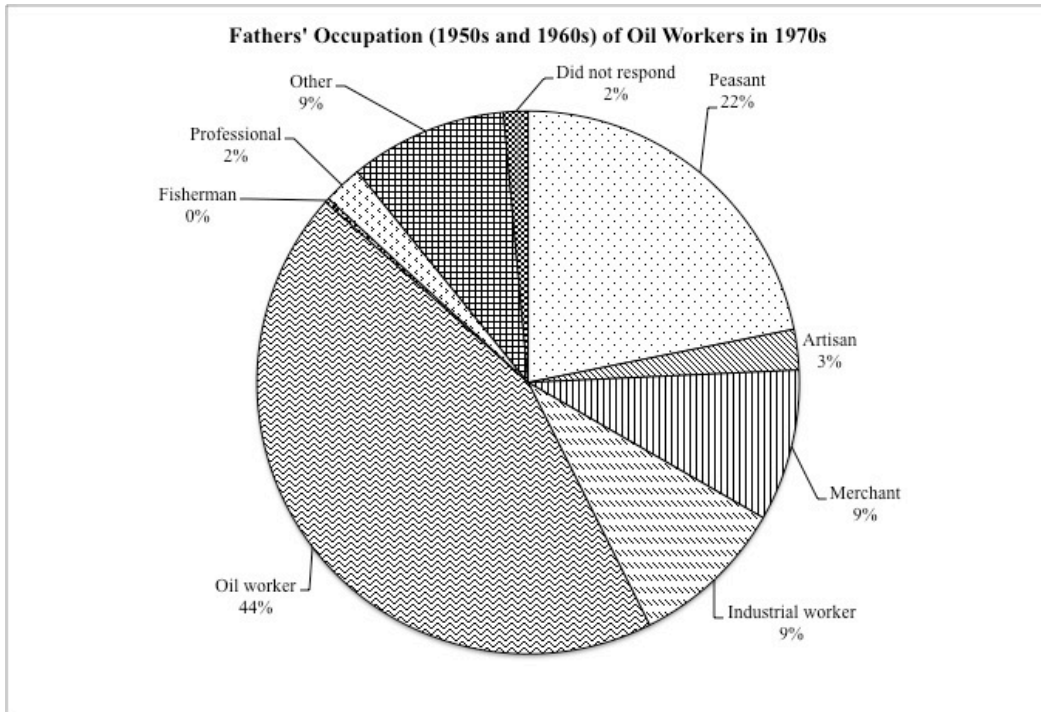
Did not respond	7.56	1.46
Total	100.00	100.00

**Figure 3 – Oil Workers’ Grandfather’s Occupation in 1970**





**Figure 3(a) – Oil Workers’ Father’s Occupation in 1970**



Source: Author’s own elaboration based on: Antonio Salazar Segura, “El movimiento sindical petrolero, 1960-1980,” in *Los sindicatos nacionales. Petroleros*. Coord. by Javier Aguilar (México: GV Editores, 1986), 244.

The data presented above very clearly demonstrates a progressive shift in the socioeconomic origins of oil workers, which explains the types of relationships that these workers developed with the agrarian authorities regarding their property rights. During the 1920s most petitioners were able to demonstrate their need for land as rural workers, even if they were occasional or permanent oil laborers. Starting in the 1930s, however, by formally being assigned to the industrial working class, oil workers could no longer demonstrate their need for agricultural land, even if in practice they depended on it for subsistence or extra income. Better said, during the first few decades of oil production in Mexico the demands and interests of peasants and workers were the same because the boundaries between rural and industrial work were not clear. Through the formalization

of the system of sectors and the adherence of most labor unions to large workers' confederations, those demands—at least how they were perceived from above—reflected entirely separated interests and needs.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, then, the social and economic division promoted by the National Agrarian Commission and the federal government for the redistribution of land targeted groups whose members could not be encapsulated in one particular category. In other words, this division worked well in theory, but it could not be enforced as long as petitioners themselves did not make sense of where their demands lay. In the late 1930s and 40s, those demands and interests started to show starker signs of separation, especially because oil workers began identifying more strongly as industrial workers. However, land struggles continued to show people's complex understanding of their property rights that did not necessarily correspond with their particular socioeconomic group.<sup>79</sup>

A good example of this phenomenon is Jopoy, northern Veracruz. In 1928, governor Adalberto Tejeda gave a provisional grant of almost 300 hectares taken from Hacienda El Tulillo in the municipality of Pánuco—property of the Mexican Petroleum Company—to a number of families that formed an Agrarian Committee. The Local Agrarian Commission agreed with Tejeda's provision and sent a recommendation to the National Agrarian Commission to that effect. President Emilio Portes Gil signed the definitive grant in 1930, but the municipal president of Pánuco declared that two groups were fighting for the territory. One was the Agrarian Committee and the other a

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<sup>79</sup> Olvera, "Origen social, condiciones de vida."

Cooperative, and their interests clashed because the hacienda had very good lands for planting.

The presidential grant had been given to the Committee, the members of which accused the Cooperative of being representatives of the Mexican Petroleum Company, “mocking the agrarian laws.”<sup>80</sup> A local deputy agreed that “through astute maneuvers, the affected landowners create difficulties among the ejidatarios not only [in Jopoy], but also in all the municipalities of Ozuluama,” trying to put pressure on the ejidatarios to abandon the granted territories.<sup>81</sup> The members of the Agrarian Committee ultimately wrote to governor Tejeda asking for a final response to their plight and adding, “in fear of losing our ejido, we would like to use our few carabines to defend our guarantees.”<sup>82</sup> At the same time, the Cooperative accused the members of the Agrarian Committee of “thugs and thieves,” stating that they [the members of the Cooperative] had occupied that area for thirty years and that they were being antagonized “for not becoming agraristas.”<sup>83</sup>

Here, workers and peasants were fighting in a struggle that began showing their adherence to particular labor organizations. The accusation that some in the Cooperative were representatives—though the letter does not specify whether they were oil workers—of the Mexican Petroleum Company pretended to invalidate the Cooperative’s claims to

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<sup>80</sup> Mauro González, Presidente de la Comisión Permanente de la Liga de Comunidades Agrarias to Pascual Ortiz Rubio, May 17, 1930. AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipality of Pánuco, 1928. Box 268, File 775.

<sup>81</sup> Local deputy Agustín G. Alvarado to the President of the Local Agrarian Commission, January 30, 1931. AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipality of Pánuco, 1928. Box 268, File 775.

<sup>82</sup> Anselmo S. Silva, Secretary of the Agrarian Administrative Committee to Governor Adalberto Tejeda. Jopoy, Veracruz, January 11, 1931. AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipality of Pánuco, 1928. Box 268, File 775.

<sup>83</sup> H. Contreras and others to President Pascual Ortiz Rubio. El Jopoy, Veracruz. March 10, 1932. AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipality of Pánuco, 1928. Box 268, File 775.

the agrarian authorities. Like this there are several other examples. Agricultural land, however, was not the only source of conflict. Housing—or lack thereof—also produced great discontent among workers and tensions with the oil companies.

Oil workers tended to earn higher salaries than laborers of other industries,<sup>84</sup> but they, their families, and others who occupied lands near the oil wells still faced grueling working conditions and insufficient housing, shacks that were built dangerously close to the wells, high rents, and unsanitary quarters. Numerous authors described the living environments in the Mexican oil communities before 1938 and provided a detailed description of Mexicans' homes. Journalist Elvira Vargas reported, "...over sections that look like swamps, covered in mud, puddles and garbage, we can see the huts. Inside, we find crowded men, women, and animals. Putrid water, clouds of Anopheles mosquitoes, and a sad lonely flower complete the landscape, together with sick and neglected children."<sup>85</sup>

This type of living arrangement was neither unique to the oil industry nor to the Mexican case, given that most industrial and agricultural enclaves in Latin America (oil, mining, banana, or coffee, to name a few) functioned in the same way. Laborers were obligated to live under drab conditions in the camps, while managers enjoyed their seclusion inside Western-style little "towns." Oil companies did not allow workers to fix their homes, either. One laborer explained to Vargas that many of them had tried to build homes in cleaner, more comfortable areas, but that the company "refuse[d] entirely,

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<sup>84</sup> Jonathan C. Brown, "Foreign and Native-Born Workers in Porfirian Mexico," *The American Historical Review* 93:3 (1993): 789.

<sup>85</sup> Elvira Vargas, *Lo que vi en la tierra del petróleo* (Mexico, n/p: 1938), 21.

saying that at any moment the company may need ‘its lands’ for machinery and drilling.”<sup>86</sup>

Workers responded in various ways to this lack of housing. In 1938 Minatitlán, for example, federal officials, oil-company managers, and the local police department exchanged lengthy correspondence regarding a group of “invaders” that had settled near the refinery. Police reports indicate that a number of El Águila workers settled illegally in an area called El Plan, and refused to leave, under the argument that “having worked for [El Águila] for more than seven years, and considering the company’s broken promises to provide lands for its workers,” they had the right to live there and create their own workers’ colony (*colonia obrera*).<sup>87</sup> One of the “invaders” declared that he “understood that he had the right to occupy those lands, since he ha[d] worked for the company for ‘some time’.”<sup>88</sup> Another stated that he never thought his actions were illegal, since he knew that the territory belonged to El Águila, and having been a worker for the company, he considered that “he would have no difficulties” occupying the area.<sup>89</sup> One more worker complained about the high lodging prices in the oil town, of how El Águila had refused to listen to workers’ demands concerning affordable housing, and that he considered it legal to occupy those lands, since he had worked for them for “a while.”<sup>90</sup>

Many workers realized that the shacks that the oil companies provided, especially for laborers who were not married, were entirely inadequate. Others considered that the lodging options were too expensive. Yet a large number of workers simply did not have a

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<sup>86</sup> *Idem*, 24.

<sup>87</sup> Acta notarial de interrogatorio. Oficina de Arturo R. Trejo. Pemex Archive, File 14364.

<sup>88</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>89</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>90</sup> *Idem*.

place to stay when they arrived to the fields, many times sharing shacks with dozens of men in unhygienic conditions. Workers expected the companies to provide them homes. When this did not occur, they expressed willingness to build their own, but for that they needed land. This was common occurrence in Minatitlán. Since 1908, El Águila Petroleum Company leased large areas of land from the federal government to build the refinery and reserved parts of that territory for workers' houses, which the company never built. The company gave their workers "verbal permits" to have the laborers themselves build their homes in the northern edge of the refinery, occupying two ejidos called El Campo and Tacoteno, and charging each worker 50 cents a month for rent. Company directives also ordered those who no longer worked for the El Águila to vacate their homes. In this way, company officials said, El Águila ensured that laborers lived close to the oil fields and the refinery, and that people strange to the company did not occupy those lands.

In 1928, these executives sent a long Memorandum to their superiors in Mexico City in which they informed that the workers had sublet their homes and terrains to people who did not work for the company, charging rent money and allowing strangers to build houses in El Águila's lands. That was not the only problem. A few months before, they said, a group of individuals had actually petitioned the agrarian authorities to grant them the lands in El Campo to extend the village of Minatitlán. Without waiting for the resolution, these workers and the subletting strangers "built homes and began planting without the company's permission."<sup>91</sup> The executives suggested that those terrains should be sold to the workers, so the company could at least get some revenue. Otherwise, the

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<sup>91</sup> Unsigned memorandum. Pemex Archive, Box 3470, File 85808.

company ran the risk of losing both El Campo and Tacoteno if the federal government expropriated them to make communal property.<sup>92</sup> “El Águila,” established the memo, “must cover itself by making contracts with any and all occupants of those lands.”<sup>93</sup>

The laborers refused to sign the contracts, thinking that they would be ceding the rights to their homes and accused the company of abusing the labor laws. In turn, the company reported “some agrarian influence in the workers’ colony” and “agitators exercising power over the workers and pushing them to not sign the contracts.” The agrarian sway, said the managers, also included a “terror campaign” led by the Workers’ Union, whose members “physically threatened employees friendly to the company.”<sup>94</sup> Moreover, considered El Águila executive, “the fact that the whole matter has been taken up by the Liga Agraria [a peasant organization]... is liable to create considerable trouble and there has been a noticeable dropping of signatures...”<sup>95</sup> Even worse, there were two assassinations in the refinery. The authorities, they continued, did not provide any guarantees, as they were “colluded with the Union.”<sup>96</sup>

The land struggles of the late 1920s and mid-1930s coincided with the process of unionization that oil workers spearheaded and which acquired immense strength right before the nationalization of the oil industry in 1938. Historians have considered that the efforts to form oil workers’ unions and in general the changes in workers’ ideology and

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<sup>92</sup> Letter to Noe Graham, unsigned. Pemex Archive, Box 3967, File 95570.

<sup>93</sup> January 20, 1928, Unsigned Memo, Pemex Archive, Box 3967, File 95570.

<sup>94</sup> W. Shelley a G.G. Roberts, Welfare Manager of El Águila, September 11, 1928, Pemex Archive, Box 3470, File 85808.

<sup>95</sup> Noe Graham Gurría to Luis Riba. Puerto México, Veracruz, September 17, 1928. Pemex Archive, Box 3967, File 95570.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from Noe Graham Gurría to Manuel Flores, January 16, 1929. Pemex Archive Box 3470, File 85808.

culture, mark the transformation of these groups into a true proletariat.<sup>97</sup> Then, the founding of the National Oil Workers' Union (STPRM) in 1935 was the culmination of such process. This turn of events, however, did not prevent oil laborers from continuing to make agricultural land petitions.

In 1936, a group of El Águila laborers formed an Agrarian Committee (Comité Particular Agrario) with the purpose of requesting lands in El Jagüey, near Minatitlán.<sup>98</sup> The Mixed Agrarian Commission established their ineligibility as ejidatarios due to their work in the oil industry, but after the 1938 expropriation the workers continued their plight by requesting an additional census. The census would prove that despite being employed by El Águila first and then by Mexican Petroleum, there were heads of family in that community in need of lands. Local peasants, however, accused the petitioners of bringing people from other regions to deceive the agrarian authorities into believing that larger numbers of dispossessed families lived in that area.<sup>99</sup> Not only did the workers manipulate the authorities, the rural laborers declared, but they also showed up at one of the meetings of the Agrarian Committee and forcefully removed the files where the documents related to the land grant were kept.<sup>100</sup>

The final resolution for this particular case, which was signed by governor Miguel Alemán and president Cárdenas in 1939, in theory only favored those who demonstrated that their sole economic activity was agriculture, but a series of letters in 1940 reveal that

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<sup>97</sup> See, Olvera, "Los trabajadores ante la nacionalización"; also, Victoria Novelo, *La difícil democracia de los petroleros: historia de un proyecto sindical* (México: CIESAS/Ediciones el Caballito, 1991).

<sup>98</sup> Letter to Gabino Vázquez, Chair of the Agrarian Department from El Jagüey Executive Agrarian Committee, December 17, 1938. AGEM/CAM, El Jagüey, Antiguo Cantón de Minatitlán, Box 671, File 2895.

<sup>99</sup> Idem.

<sup>100</sup> Idem.



the occupants of the granted lots were in reality Mexican Petroleum workers.<sup>101</sup>

Neighbors asked Cárdenas to move a number of the grantees to another region in order to make up for the fact that they were “laboring for Pemex, and must therefore be treated as [industrial] workers.”<sup>102</sup> At the same time, the Local Agrarian Commission received numerous statements by members of the ejidal committee who complained that individuals working in the Refinery were requesting lands. “We ask you,” they wrote to the president of the Mixed Agrarian Commission, “. . . that you do not fall for the lies of these Oil Workers [sic] and landowners. . . for they are trying, through false documentation, to take everything from us.”<sup>103</sup>

These examples show that workers utilized the tools provided by the agrarian reform to advance their prerogatives, despite the fact that a clear divide between industrial laborers and peasants—both in government institutions and in the daily lives of these individuals—started to become prevalent in the mid-1930s. Indeed, while a process of proletarianization began to take place among industrial workers, peasants were also on their way to developing a well defined campesino identity—a phenomenon that Christopher Boyer has explained for the case of Michoacán.<sup>104</sup> Although the formation of the National Oil Workers’ Union and the expropriation of the oil industry contributed to the increase of a working-class identity among oil workers, they continued to show

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<sup>101</sup> Acta de Dotación de Ejidos signed by Lázaro Cárdenas and Gabino Vázquez, Chief of the Agrarian Department, June 5, 1939. AGEM/CAM, El Jagüey, Antiguo Cantón de Minatitlán, Box 671, File 2895.

<sup>102</sup> Letter to Lázaro Cárdenas from Luis Díaz Ceballos and Pastor Condado, May 9, 1940. AGEM/CAM, El Jagüey, Antiguo Cantón de Minatitlán, Box 671, File 2895.

<sup>103</sup> Letter from Tomás Gamboa to the President of the Comisión Agraria Mixta, El Jagüey, Minatitlán. AGEV/CAM Box 671, File 2895.

<sup>104</sup> Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*.

interest in adding to their wages through what they could find in their surrounding agricultural areas.

The neighboring peasant communities were not happy. In Cerro Azul, agrarian petitioners complained to the governor that laborers for Mexican Petroleum were cutting trees to sell in the precious wood market and that the vecinos had no way of protecting the forest “because [they did] not have any rights over the area until the provisional grant is provided.”<sup>105</sup> Then in El Jopoy a group of vecinos complained to President Ávila Camacho that three Pemex workers “from El Ébano, S.L.P., showed up at the Ejido and... together with soldiers from the Eighth Military Zone... kicked our *compañeros* out of their homes.” These workers and the soldiers also dragged all the vecinos’ belongings and animals outside, leaving them “at the mercy and intolerance of the weather.” This was occurring, according to the signers, because their “*compañeros* have only obtained a provisional grant over those lands that are being taken from them, despite the fact that it has been demonstrated that Petróleos [Mexicanos] does not need them at all.” The houses the peasants were expelled from, they added, were “being guarded by federal forces.”<sup>106</sup>

Though agrarian and labor radicalisms of the revolution and immediate postrevolution began giving way to regulated relationships of peasants and workers with the state, this process did not translate into a full switch in workers’ mentality. A 1941 petition is a case in point. A group of oil laborers wrote to president Ávila Camacho voicing their “bitter disappointment” at the actions that Pemex was exercising against

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<sup>105</sup> Miguel de la Cruz, President of the Agrarian Committee to the Governor. January, 1941. AGEV/CAM, Tepetzintla, Municipality of Tuxpan. Box 170, File 3322.

<sup>106</sup> Policarpo Contreras, President of the Ejidal Commisary to President Manuel Ávila Camacho. El Jopoy, Veracruz. March 4, 1945. AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipality of Pánuco, 1928. Box 268, File 775.

them. These petitioners had been railroad workers for El Águila and were now employed by Mexican Petroleum. But the company, they said, was pushing their families to “vacate the terrains which [they] occupied with their dwellings and cultivated land.” They reminded the president that they had “built their homes through innumerable sacrifices,” and that their planted plots “would be destroyed without consideration.” Such would be the “*reward*,” they said, “for having spent their youth and energies in honest and dignified work at the service of the oil industry.”<sup>107</sup>

Then, in 1942, another group of workers asked Ávila Camacho that he stop the process of land distribution near the oil field of Cerro Azul, in northern Veracruz. Apparently, an engineer from the Local Agrarian Commission had arrived to the area to divide and distribute lands, including terrains that they used, “in part as grasslands for our animals and the rest for small planting plots.” The signers were “all workers in the petroleum industry who, in our free time, are dedicated to agriculture for our benefit and that of our country.”<sup>108</sup> These individuals were indeed industrial laborers, but they also used rhetoric that placed them close to the revolutionary nationalism that land petitions clearly required. The social and political changes that contributed to define peasants’ and workers’ identities within the postrevolutionary order, plus the corporatist, interventionist, and centralist endeavors of the official party bore fruits after the expropriation, but they did not eliminate the “gray area” between agricultural and industrial work that many individuals inhabited during the first half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>107</sup> Feliciano Basurto Martínez and Ernesto Bañares to Manuel Ávila Camacho. Minatitlán, Veracruz. May 30, 1941. AGN/MAC, 509/24. Original emphasis.

<sup>108</sup> Workers of Cerro Azul to Manuel Ávila Camacho. Cerro Azul, Tepetzintla, October 30, 1942. AGEV/CAM, Cerro Azul, Municipality of Tepetzintla. Box File 3322.

## **Conclusion**

Oil workers underwent a process of proletarianization in the 1930s. The formation of the National Oil Workers' Union in 1935, the nationalization of the industry in 1938, and the general pro-labor politics of Cardenismo, added to the corporatization brought by the PRM, produced a working-class consciousness among industrial laborers. It is clear, however, that this working class did not have a static set of interests that distinguished it from the rural campesinado until well into the 1940s.

Arriving to depopulated areas, where oil camps were usually established, the idea of obtaining a land grant and therefore becoming an ejidatario became a reality for many. The fact that most of the oil fields were located in isolated regions, many of them close or on lands used for agricultural production, made the building of a working-class identity among oil workers different from that in industries that operated in urban zones. Also, considering the fact that oil production required the use of large tracts of territory, the enclosing of roads, and the construction of foreign "villages," made these workers deeply aware of their own relationship to the use of soil, roads, and boundaries that for many years foreigners defined. Laborers also refused, consciously or otherwise, to be encapsulated and labeled through the socioeconomic categories that the postrevolutionary government assigned to different groups. In other words, whereas after the revolution peasants repeatedly made use of their position as campesinos to defend their right to obtain a piece of land through the agrarian reform, oil workers very few times defined themselves as such when making petitions.

The agrarian reform was shaped by a set of rules that allowed the postrevolutionary regime to grant plots in the most organized way possible, but not the

fairest, necessarily. The division of society proposed through the formation of the Party of the Mexican Revolution in 1938, in particular, limited the ways in which Mexicans interacted with each other and with the institutions that ruled the country, among them those that structured the agrarian reform.

The main conclusion of these reflections is that transitory workers cannot exist in a corporatist system, for they cannot be “placed” in any one particular organization, confederation, or political group. In other words, there is no one single labor union that can contain them because their interests are so specific to their particular circumstances. This characteristic has made them an uncomfortable presence across the board—for the official party that could not fulfill their diverse demands and control their militancy; for the traditional labor unions that could not shape their working-class identity as industrial workers; and for historians who have tried to make sense of their varied experiences. The relationship that postrevolutionary citizens developed toward land and property reveals these transient laborers as protagonists of a crucial moment in Mexico’s modern history—the move from an economy that depended mostly on agriculture to one that relied increasingly on its industry.

## **Chapter 2: Territorial Enclosures, Nationalism, and the Patrimony of the Nation**

This chapter is about the people living near the oil fields of Veracruz and how they experienced the re-accommodation of property and territory during the years when foreign oil companies operated in Mexico. I study how the enclosure of lands, water, and roads affected the relationship that the oil communities developed with these companies and with the postrevolutionary government. Territorial encroachment in the pre-1938

period marks a crucial moment of enclosure, one that entailed the appropriation—many times fraudulent—of lands, roads, and waters by the foreign oil companies in northern and southern Veracruz. I argue that these actions, which separated locals from lands and water, fueled ideas about national patrimony among those living in the oil communities, leading them to, in many cases, define their sense of national belonging through the access they did or did not have to land and resources.<sup>109</sup>

Through a series of cases, I first trace the different modalities of enclosure that the foreign oil companies used in Mexico. These examples reveal the ways in which residents in oil areas made sense of what was essentially a contradictory message: the winning faction of the Mexican revolution promised to provide justice to the dispossessed, protect the rights of workers, and produce laws that would safeguard the property of the nation. In practice, foreign oil companies—in many cases aided by local officials—consistently prevented agrarian grantees from occupying lands, violated labor laws, and enclosed territory that, residents considered, belonged to the nation as a whole. Moreover, in the view of many in these oil communities, the foreigners who enclosed territory equaled “conquistadors” and “colonizers,” which added to the general sense of injustice that these demarcations produced and contributed to the development of a particular type of revolutionary nationalism in these areas. In this section I also point to the fact that, as with other processes of enclosure, foreign companies’ actions were very much based on capitalist impressions of who could “put the land to best use.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> See similar cases of enclosure in Thomas Klubock, “The Nature of the Frontier: Forests and Peasant Uprisings in Southern Chile,” *Social History* 36, no. 2 (May 2011): 121-142.

<sup>110</sup> *Idem.*

In the second section of this chapter, I establish the very political aspect of these enclosures, one that prevented laborers in different oil fields from communicating with one another. I argue that the result of this isolation and the control that companies kept over territory and roads delayed the process of unionization among oil workers in some areas of Veracruz. This part shows that though labor unionism among petroleum workers was fragmented from the start due to the geographic distance between fields, the fact that companies limited the use of roads, especially in northern Veracruz, hindered labor militancy even further.

### **A Note on the Literature of Enclosures**

In this chapter I rely on the recent literature that has revisited the phenomenon of “enclosure of the commons” that Marxist historians analyzed during the 1960s. The first studies of enclosures focused on how England’s rural gentry made pastures and forests—which had constituted the “commons” for the peasantry—inaccessible during the eighteenth century. The parliamentary enclosing acts that appropriated more than 6 million acres of land—about a quarter of cultivated acreage—favoring the politically dominant landowners, denied access to communities that had relied on those commons to obtain firewood and to graze their animals.<sup>111</sup>

Marxist historians contended that the formation of the English working class was in some ways a consequence of the enclosures of land and natural resources, which pushed entire communities to migrate to the industrializing city. In short, the commodification of land represented a process of dispossession, which pushed

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<sup>111</sup> For reflections on patterns of capitalist enclosures, see Peter Linebaugh, “Enclosures from the Bottom Up,” *Radical History Review* 108. Enclosures: Fences, Walls, and Contested Spaces (Fall 2010): 13.

communities to migrate.<sup>112</sup> E.P. Thompson, for example, traced social and legal conflicts over the use of the commons during the industrialization of England. Indeed, he considered it “an imposition of capitalist property definitions” upon the rural villages.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, the act of encroaching common property had unprecedented consequences for those who had based their subsistence on those lands. It automatically transformed local inhabitants of the traditional commons into squatters and poachers, while fences separated them from their habitual sources for food, firewood, and grazing land.<sup>114</sup>

In the last few years, numerous scholars have gone beyond the paradigmatic English example and considered “enclosures of commons” as both a phenomenon that is prevalent in modern life and a category of analysis that allows us to understand such phenomenon. This view has extended the definition of enclosure to encompass various means of closing off common property in the interest of neoliberal property rights. From the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico and its connection with the 1992 constitutional reforms to article 27 which repealed the ejido, to the enclosing of their ancestral lands and waters in Indonesia and Nigeria, to the discussions surrounding property rights in the World Wide Web as a “knowledge commons,” these “new enclosures” provide both literal and metaphorical elements that tell us as much about the socioeconomic, legal, and

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<sup>112</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1966 [1963]).

<sup>113</sup> Thompson, *The Making*; Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (London: Merlin Press, 1991).

<sup>114</sup> Amy Chazkel and David Serlin, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Radical History Review* 108. Enclosures: Fences, Walls, and Contested Spaces (Fall 2010): 3.



political affairs of a community, as about the community's cultural connection to land and property rights.<sup>115</sup>

In Latin America, this literature of enclosures has begun to grow in the last decade. From the use of Indian lands in Chile and Mexico for the creation of national parks, to the massive production of rubber through the enclosure of the Amazonian forests—reaching the extreme of “expropriating” indigenous people for manual work—these processes have received considerable attention.<sup>116</sup> In the history of Latin American enclosures, the processes of urbanization have been particularly favored, with an emphasis on sustainability and the social re-accommodation that the access to public services and resources—or the lack of it—has produced. The concept of enclosure has also helped historians understand socioeconomic processes and market trends produced by the modernization of cities, leading to novel sets of interactions based on petty commerce and intraurban transportation, like Amy Chazkel has recently shown for the

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<sup>115</sup> See Linebaugh, “Enclosures from the Bottom Up”; also Linebaugh, *Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); also Stuart Banner, *American Property: A History of How, Why, and What We Own* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>116</sup> For the Chilean forest enclosure, see Klubock, “The Nature of the Frontier”; Klubock, “The Politics of Forests and the Forestry on Chile’s Southern Frontier, 1802-1940s,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (August 2006): 535-570. For Mexican national parks, Emily Wakild, *Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico’s National Parks* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011). For the conflict in Amazonia, Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* (London: Verso, 1989); also Hugh Raffles, *In Amazonia: A Natural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); for the “commodification of human reproduction” see, Linebaugh, *Magna Carta*.

Brazilian case.<sup>117</sup> The protests that such encroachment practices in rural and urban settings have awakened in recent history have been subject of some analysis as well.<sup>118</sup>

Mexico has received little attention from this reappraising of the traditional enclosure of the commons, but the literatures that speak about the sociopolitical effects of demarcation and mapping of territory during the period of the agrarian reform, provide elements of analysis that can be seen through such perspective. Raymond Craib and Paul Eiss have written works that study how the Mexican government—both pre and post-revolutionary—imposed physical boundaries over territories that many times had constituted commons. Such delineations functioned as metaphorical and real enclosures, limiting for some and facilitating for others the access to land and resources.<sup>119</sup> These historians have emphasized the relationship that specific communities developed with the state through this process. As one more element in the process of state formation in Mexico, these demarcations demonstrate the daily concerns of individuals and communities with changing property regimes, new laws and institutions, and their rights as citizens before and after the revolution.

Taking from these literatures, in this chapter I attempt to show that the division of lands and the closing off of roads and resources in the oil fields of Mexico provide a meaningful example of enclosure—one that explains the construction of patrimonial citizenship in Mexico, as well as the political economy that accompanied oil production

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<sup>117</sup> Amy Chazkel, *Laws of Chance: Brazil's Clandestine Lottery and the Making of Public Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>118</sup> David Correia, "'Retribution Will Be Their Reward': New Mexico's Las Gorras Blancas and the Fight for the Las Vegas Grant Commons," *Radical History Review* 108. Enclosures: Fences, Walls, and Contested Spaces (Fall 2010): 49-72.

<sup>119</sup> See Raymond Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*; Paul Eiss, *In the Name of El Pueblo: Place, Community and the Politics of History in Yucatán* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

on the ground. What I present here can either be seen from the perspective of a systematic encroachment of territory in the traditional Marxist sense—oil companies displacing small farmers and indigenous communities from their common lands for the production of petroleum—or through the idea that there existed a consistent, yet “discreet,” process of enclosure. This process consisted in the companies’ demarcation of Mexican territory through the use of barbed wire, walls, and doors, limiting Mexicans’ access to what in some cases had been communal roads. Companies also formed “foreign villages” within oil towns, prohibiting locals from accessing those areas.

Though this understated process took place in ways that seem small in the general history of petroleum production in Mexico, this type of enclosure acquires larger meanings when viewed from the perspective of people’s experiences regarding their property rights on the ground, as well as their connection to wider political thought and action related to the redefinition of property regimes in the postrevolution. In this chapter I focus on the everyday practices associated with dispossession, mobility, and use of land and resources, for which the conceptual framework of enclosure of the commons proves particularly helpful. Such perspective allows me to expand on the sociopolitical implications of changing property rights after the revolution and explain the socioeconomic and cultural effects that the very act of physically closing off or occupying a space produced in the oil communities of Veracruz.

### **The Enclosure of Land and Water in the Oil Fields**

The enclosures that I address in this section are mainly of territory and water, each one representing particular sets of problems and conflicts between oil communities and foreign companies. The closing off of land accomplished some very basic purposes:

segregating foreign bosses and Mexican workers; protecting machinery, storage tanks, and pipes from residents; and demarcating areas for exploration and drilling. Another, not so evident, result was that these companies created a type of foreign territory within Mexico's borders, inadvertently changing the status of communities—from residents to squatters—depending on which side of the line they lived and worked. Moreover, this demarcation created a dynamic where British and U.S. managers were seen as “colonizers” or “conquistadors,” igniting a sense of nationalism among people living in the oil communities that was very much related to the limitations of their access to land.

Reducing the access to water had the basic purpose of pushing residents away from the fields, but as I will show, this measure not only affected those who settled near the oil fields after the companies arrived, but also put pressure on neighboring small ranchers and farmers to find alternative water sources for themselves and their animals. The oil industry brought deep changes in landscape, access to clean water, and the health of workers and residents. These cases of enclosure echo the most basic principle that has led the circumscription of territory in the last three hundred years—namely, the need to produce and accumulate.<sup>120</sup>

Foreign oil companies acquired large tracts of land in the oil zones of Veracruz. They signed leases and bought territory from large landowners and small ranchers. They also, on occasion, made use of coercive force to push mestizo and indigenous peasants from those lands. Roberto Hernández Elizondo, Myrna Santiago, and Stephen Haber have studied these major land acquisitions—as have Lorenzo Meyer, Merrill Rippy, and

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<sup>120</sup> Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*. Also, Santiago, “Class and Nature in the Oil Industry of Northern Veracruz, 1900-1938,” in *Environmental History of Modern Mexico*, edited by Christopher R. Boyer (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 173-191.

Jonathan Brown to a lesser extent—through an analysis of lease contracts, reports of the public property registry (Registro Público de la Propiedad), and the concession documents of the Oil Department (Departamento del Petróleo). These findings have mainly explained the economic and political consequences of foreign companies' land holdings and mostly how they affected mestizo ranchers, though Myrna Santiago does provide interesting analyses on the experiences of indigenous communities in northern Veracruz.<sup>121</sup>

The everyday practices that accompanied such acquisitions—including the socioeconomic and sociopolitical consequences they produced for the locals and that either fortified or challenged the control foreigners held over Mexican territory, have been generally overlooked. Such practices included the enclosing of territory, land, and roads. Using walls, fences, and armed guards, foreign enterprises tried to vacate territories that they owned or leased. On occasion, these attempts took place when groups that neither worked for a particular company nor had any rights over the territory were invading lands. In other instances, however, companies attempted expulsions of residents who had settled before the development of the oil industry. Yet in other cases, the “squatters” were employees of the various oil companies that operated in Veracruz.

The ways in which people living in these areas faced such enclosures and expulsions reflect practices of landownership and occupation that were prevalent in Mexico since the colonial period. The basic colonial organization of the geographic and social units of indigenous communities entailed town sites (*fundos legales*), common

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<sup>121</sup> Hernández Elizondo, *Propietarios y especuladores*; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*; Brown, *Oil and Revolution*; Rippy, *Oil*; Meyer, *Mexico and the United States*; Haber, Razo, and Maurer, “When the Law.”

areas to obtain wood (*ejidos*), and grazing lands (*montes*). As such, landholding in rural areas during most of Mexican history consistently reflected “a bundle of rights, rather than a notion of ownership,” at least throughout the revolution and the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>122</sup>

The prevalent practice of maintaining common areas for the use of all residents in a rural community even survived the liberal efforts to privatize communal lands in the nineteenth century. Though most scholars view the process of land division and commodification during the Reforma period and the Porfiriato as usurpation of indigenous rights, a number of them have reappraised this idea.<sup>123</sup> These historians have concluded that the Mexican state many times protected peasants and other landholders and provided enough official economic incentives to prevent private companies from usurping occupied land.<sup>124</sup> Though there was an undeniable transformation of property regimes during the mid and late nineteenth century and the lands of many pueblos were privatized during the Porfiriato, there was also a sense of continuity in the system that allowed people to have access to empty plots or federal lands to establish temporary settlements or engage in subsistence practices, like gathering firewood and grazing animals. Thus, the revolutionary rhetoric that favored the formation of communally owned plots really echoed a practice that was much older than the postrevolutionary agrarian laws. The arrival of the oil companies in the early twentieth century therefore affected customs that had been common to rural populations in Mexico for centuries.

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<sup>122</sup> Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*, 95.

<sup>123</sup> Kourí, “Interpreting”; for the process of land concentration among foreigners, see Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute*.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Holden, *Mexico and the Survey of Public Lands: the Management of Modernization, 1876-1911* (DeKalb, Ill. Northern Illinois University Press, 1994).

A good example of the changes in landholding patterns in Veracruz and that provides an idea of the types of practices that foreign companies used to establish settlements can be found in Minatitlán, where negotiations over land began early in the history of oil production. People living in a plot called El Gavilán, wrote to the governor of Veracruz in 1915 explaining that since time immemorial, their forefathers settled in that area, “enjoying quietly and peacefully these terrains.” Then, local authorities began demanding the payment of rents from this community, to which the residents could not object since, as one of the petitioners said, the territory belonged to Weetman Pearson, “the associate of tyrant Porfirio Díaz, who gave away our national territory to his family, his favorites, and the foreigners of whom he became a partner.” Now, the Compañía Mexicana de Bienes Inmuebles, a subsidiary of British enterprise El Águila Petroleum Company, was recognizing neither the payments, for which the neighbors presented numerous receipts, nor the exact dimensions of the area that the community could occupy. “Therefore,” the letter continued, “we ask that you give us these terrains that are necessary to form the town site (fundo legal) and of communal Ejidos for planting and harvesting.”<sup>125</sup> Such arrangements, where families formed settlements for which they did not have property titles, but where they enjoyed the use of common areas, were not rare in Veracruz and in other states, since authorities many times allowed communities to form settlements through oral provisions. The arrival of oil companies disturbed this order of things.

Oil companies received lease contracts and drilling concessions from pre and postrevolutionary governments, but local communities were in many cases the last to find

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<sup>125</sup> Neighbors of El Gavilán to the Governor of Veracruz. October 22, 1917 [1915]. AGEV/CAM El Gavilán, Municipality of Minatitlán, File 65.

out that foreign capitalists had rights over their lands. Neighbors of Zacamixtle, in northern Veracruz, for example, complained that representatives of a number of oil companies arrived to their town arguing that they had obtained drilling concessions by the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Labor (Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo). They proceeded to install barbed wire, marking the territory that supposedly entered within the concession, “but leaving inside many houses inhabited by neighbors who have the need to live in this town.”<sup>126</sup> One of the companies, named Carl V. Schlaet and Co., built a derrick and began to drill, disregarding entirely “the countless damages that all the neighbors in this town will suffer the day when an oil ‘geyser’ springs up.”<sup>127</sup> The neighbors asked the state governor to revoke the concessions and to remove the barbed wire “that prevents us from making free use of that which belongs to all the neighbors.”<sup>128</sup> Moreover, they indicated that the federal government had no business providing oil concessions in those lands that were owned communally since 1898.

The Veracruz state government supported the petitioners and recommended that the concessions be annulled; “otherwise,” a local representative recognized, “the town would be divested from its communal town site and would have to emigrate, for they lack plots on which to settle and grow.”<sup>129</sup> However, the local authorities—the municipal president and the military barrack’s chief—were not cooperating. On the one hand, the municipal president had apparently told the residents that he would “allow access to the Zacamixtle plots to whomever [he] pleased,” which perhaps reflects some “arrangement”

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<sup>126</sup> Erasmo Salvador and others to Adalberto Tejeda. December 3, 1920. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 173, File 33.

<sup>127</sup> *Idem*

<sup>128</sup> *Idem*

<sup>129</sup> General Secretary, Government of the State of Veracruz. Debruary 16, 1921. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 173, File 33.



he had with the oil company.<sup>130</sup> On the other, when the barrack's chief was interrogated as to why he had not prevented the oil companies from enclosing the town site, he responded that though he had tried to do so "most earnestly and patriotically," the companies had presented official documents that supported their claims.<sup>131</sup> And those claims were valid. An envoy for the state government who studied the case recognized that the neighbors had lost contact with larger population centers during the revolution and had not been informed of the changes in oil policy instituted by Venustiano Carranza, which allowed the federal government to provide concessions for oil exploitation in disentailed plots. Because the neighbors had been misinformed and had not submitted their property titles to declare the validity of their settlement, the concessions to the foreign company had been granted.<sup>132</sup>

The neighbors of Zacamixtle, then, had to contend with the foreign company that installed barbed wire in their common areas, with the local and federal authorities that allowed it, and with their own sense of what constituted their property rights. Their plight, as that of many other petitioners in different regions of Veracruz, was very much related to what they considered to be their role not only as Mexican citizens, but also as citizens of the postrevolution, whose rights were to be respected above those of foreigners'. They in fact claimed to be defending their rights over property as a patriotic feat. Among their complaints, the people of Zacamixtle asked the state legislature to

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<sup>130</sup> Residents of Zacamixtle to Adalberto Tejeda. February 17, 1921. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 173, File 33.

<sup>131</sup> Report by the sub-Secretary of the State Government. June 10, 1922. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 173, File 33.

<sup>132</sup> Joaquín Jara Díaz to Adalberto Tejeda. February 9, 1921. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 173, File 33.

recognize their prerogative as “*veracruzanos*,”<sup>133</sup> while other petitioners in different areas referred to themselves as “humble citizens,” “dignified Mexicans,” “honest and responsible citizens.” In another land petition, this time in northern Veracruz, a man wrote to Pascual Ortiz Rubio the following: “Now, Mr. President, to be a good citizen, a man needs to fulfill his civic duties and always be willing to make the biggest sacrifices in defense of his country.” He declared that he who “does not defend the land on which he was born, the land that constitutes his patrimony, and where his children were born will never be a good citizen and less so a patriot.”<sup>134</sup>

In another typical example of the type of nationalistic rhetoric that led these petitions, the collective owners of a plot named Juan Felipe—one of the best documented cases of how oil exploitation affected *condueñazgos* in Veracruz—wrote a letter to president Álvaro Obregón asking him to reconsider his intention of giving La Huasteca Petroleum Co. the concession to drill oil in their plot.<sup>135</sup> They recognized that, as “humble citizens,” they did not have the authority or power to ask for such a thing; however, they declared that the only weapon they had “against the unlimited ambition of foreign owners, was their dignity as Mexicans.”<sup>136</sup> They wished that before the gold of La Huasteca, the rights of the legitimate owners of Juan Felipe could be established. The owners asked the president to keep in mind that their rights went beyond those of a foreign company, even if that company “had deposited three million pesos to the

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<sup>133</sup> Erasmo Salvador and others to Adalberto Tejeda. December 3, 1920. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 173, File 33.

<sup>134</sup> Elpidio Rodríguez to President Pascual Ortiz Rubio. El Jopoy, Veracruz. May 30, 1931. AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipality of Pánuco, 1928. Box 268, File 775.

<sup>135</sup> See Serna, *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural*, 301-315.

<sup>136</sup> Joaquín del Castro to Álvaro Obregón. Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz, Fondo Secretaría de Gobernación, Sección Fomento, Serie: Industria Petrolera (hereafter AGEV/FF/IP) Box, 174, File 50.

treasury.” Their plight was formulated from the premise that “they had rights as human beings that should be recognized all over the world, but especially in Mexico, from where [they were] humble citizens.”<sup>137</sup>

Formulaic as they are, these petitions acquire different meaning when viewed in the larger context of foreign oil exploitation on Mexican soil and generally in the context of the vast control that these companies held over Mexican territory in some areas. In places like Tampico, Minatitlán, or Tuxpan, where petroleum companies installed their offices, as well as in smaller towns where bosses built gated communities that separated them from neighboring towns and workers, people consistently complained about the enclosing of land.

One of the largest issues was the difference between foreign villas and the camps where Mexican workers lived. The executive villas, as an oil worker described them, “had sturdy homes, built with real construction material. They had running water and drainage. Soccer and golf courses.... [The properties] were guarded by armed guards (guardias blancas) and surrounded by wired fences.”<sup>138</sup> In a similar vein, when asked about his experience laboring as an oilman in one of El Águila wells, another worker compared the foreign managers with “conquistadors.” He explained, “whenever an Englishman came walking on the wooden beams, the Mexicans had to bow their heads and step in the mud... They lived in their own colony, in houses that did not look Mexican. They looked more like Californian homes.”<sup>139</sup> José Aguilar, a worker in the Río Grande factory near the oil fields of Cerro Azul, explained that, to make matters worse,

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<sup>137</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>138</sup> Lief Adleson’s interview with Mr. Francisco Monroy Díaz, Tampico, 1974. Biblioteca Manuel Orozco y Berra, Mexico City, Proyecto Historia Oral-4/26 (PHO).

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

workers had a strict curfew and that anyone who went out of his shack after 9 p.m. was automatically arrested.<sup>140</sup> Then, in Tampamachoco, northern Veracruz, residents complained that El Águila, represented by “English bosses,” had set up oil camps and considered more than 2000 hectares to be a “foreign colony.” According to the neighbors, the company did not allow Mexicans to live there, “because the area is foreign property, where only [the British] have power and rights, because they leased the lands from the Supreme Government.”<sup>141</sup> When the signers pointed to their condition as Mexicans or citizens of the revolution, then, they were both referencing a historical right against these new “conquistadors” and admonishing the postrevolutionary government to make good on its promises to protect the rights of Mexican citizens.

Petitioners’ references to their citizenship rights also came from the general knowledge that the constitution of 1917 had brought changes to the property rights of common folk. Inspired in the Agrarian Law of January 6, 1915—Venustiano Carranza’s attempt at satisfying the demands of landless peasants that participated in the revolution—article 27 provided legal precedent to all land petitions that came after the armed struggle. It also delivered the ideological basis for the institutions that implemented the agrarian reform. This constitutional precept, then, influenced political, intellectual, and popular discourses on land distribution. As such, the languages of property that resembled the postrevolutionary regime’s messages of land justice very quickly became a common rhetorical tool used by land petitioners during the agrarian reform and those who wished to defend the national territory from foreign oil companies.

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<sup>140</sup> Lief Adleson’s interview with Mr. José Aguilar Vargas, April 10, 1976 in Poza Rica, Veracruz. PHO/4/20.

<sup>141</sup> Pemex Archive, Box 617, Exp. 16910.

In a plot named Tortuguero, for example, a group of indigenous families requested the lands on which they had built their small ranches. They feared that, with the industrial growth of the area, they would be thrown out of their homes because the families had not been able to plant and harvest as much as they considered necessary. If the terrains belonged to them, they said, they “would have already planted fruit trees, would obtain better harvests, and could sell [their] produce in Puerto México.” They expressed hope that this time their plight would be heard because they had been suffering “countless abuses since 1911”—their houses had been burnt; members of their families hunted and assassinated; their harvests had been destroyed; and their animals stolen. The only reason they stayed in the area was “the love to the land that gives us what we need for life’s necessities” and the hope of “a favorable change,” which, they considered, had now arrived. “We feel our case can be included within the prescriptions of the Law of January 6, 1915,” the petitioners concluded.<sup>142</sup>

In a similar case, neighbors of Minatitlán asked Veracruz governor Cándido Aguilar “to abide by the principles of the Revolution and of the party” and provide them with ejidos, because they all were “dedicated to agriculture and, according to the Law of January 6, 1915, are eligible and what we ask for is fair.”<sup>143</sup> In El Jopoy, a few years later, petitioners were comfortably citing Article 27 in addition to the Agrarian Law of 1915. Stating that they lacked “lands to harvest... to obtain economic independence,” they were invoking “article 3 of the Law of January 6, 1915, constitutional Article 27,

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<sup>142</sup> Casiano Pérez and others to the Local Agrarian Commission. May 31, 1918. Tortuguero, Veracruz. AGEV/CAM, Box 42, File 98.

<sup>143</sup> M. Alafita to Cándido Aguilar, July 25, 1921. Minatitlán, Veracruz. AGEV/CAM, File 266, Box 144.

and other agrarian dispositions,” to request ejidos.<sup>144</sup> In sum, these petitions express a hope that the revolutionary laws would in fact be useful and relevant to the signers.

When faced with the resentment that neighbors in the oil communities felt about the power that the companies held over territory and with the new legal knowledge that petitioners showed, foreign bosses tended to respond with stronger means of control, further limiting people’s actions in the oil fields. In the Tampamachoco case mentioned before, El Águila essentially made squatters out of those who had lived in the area years before the British drillers arrived. They did so by enclosing land and water that, El Águila managers considered, belonged to the company by way of a lease contract with the Mexican government. Then, they proceeded to push the Mexican authorities to vacate houses, by force if necessary, that remained in the lands under lease. The fact that several families refused to leave made the British company declare that they had a “land invasion problem.” Moreover, these men considered, this issue was not being addressed by the local authorities—the port captain in fact said he would not use any force and would go from house to house to let residents know that they had to vacate, to which company managers responded that it was “absurd that [the captain] wants to treat those thieves of the federal government and of the company with benevolence, even gentlemanliness.”<sup>145</sup>

One solution El Águila managers concocted was to build a fence that separated the federal zone over which the company claimed rights from the rest of the territory. This idea had its drawbacks. El Aguila representatives believed that the people who were already established in the federal zone would have no way out and break the fence. “We

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<sup>144</sup> Cruz Ávila to Adalberto Tejeda, March 21, 1928. El Jopoy, Pánuco, Veracruz. AGEV/CAM, Box 268, File 775.

<sup>145</sup> M. Flores Jr. to Francisco Diez Barroso. May 12, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

would need” they said, “a large body of armed men to get [the people] to respect it.” The failed attempts to maintain the fence, they thought, would be “another element of disrespect on behalf of the neighbors of Tampamachoco, further debilitating our image there.”<sup>146</sup>

A more effective way to expel the “invaders,” the managers believed, was to deny them access to basic services; otherwise, they considered, “once the neighbors see that we are weak, negligent, incapable... not being able to attain the expulsion... allowing [the squatters] to do as they please, that is the moment when we will be lost.”<sup>147</sup> The final decision was to build a barrier to enclose the faucet from which Tampamachoco neighbors got their drinking water. “If they were to fail to obtain water, they would go,” the representative stated. Moreover, “If we do this immediately... the invaders will not have access to drinking water; nor will they be able to fill up their water tanks, since it will not rain until June.”<sup>148</sup> By building this fence, the company would attain a forceful, yet voluntary expulsion. The water, the representative stated, would still be available to the workers employed by the company and those who lived outside the federal zone. Only the invaders would be affected by this measure.<sup>149</sup>

The practice of enclosing water sources had in fact been common in other areas since the first years of oil production. In 1917, near the Minatitlán refinery, a group of neighbors requested that the state governor expropriate a plot called Tacoteno, where many had lived “between five and ten years.” Because of the precise location of Tacoteno—between the Coatzacoalcos River and swampy areas to the east and west—did

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<sup>146</sup> Letter to M. Flores Jr. April 15, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

<sup>147</sup> Letter to Manuel Flores, April 11, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, Exp. 16910.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Letter to H.H. Hallatt, April 15, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, Exp. 16910.

not allow the workers to move to a nearby terrain, they had asked Pearson & Son (later El Águila) to allow them to rent those lands and build homes. When they sent this petition, a Pearson representative, one Mr. Collins, had “closed off the well, preventing residents from obtaining water.” Moreover, within the territory that Collins had appropriated there were a number of springs that produced drinking water and that the town enjoyed “since time immemorial.” Because those terrains had been enclosed and a fence had been built and remained locked, the town no longer had access to that water. They asked the governor to expropriate those lands and extend the town site in order to allow the workers to “obtain [their] justified aspiration and the realization of such noble act of great magnitude and importance, such as a land grant for the proletariat to build their homes of which they lack in their own country.” Moreover, the laborers declared, “with unbelievable and irritating sarcasm [sic]” foreigners had in their power great extensions of uncultivated lands.<sup>150</sup>

The continuous enclosure of different types of terrains performed by these companies had other effects as well, which produced conflicts among the locals. In early 1938, small cattle raisers in a plot called El Yegüero, near Coatzacoalcos, wrote to the governor of Veracruz and president Cárdenas to say that they were renters of the Compañía Mexicana de Bienes Inmuebles “suffering the damages produced by the Refinery’s water disposal system (desagüe).” Residents of the neighboring plot Santa Alejandrina had obtained an agricultural land grant—despite the fact that, according to the signers, those lands were swamps and therefore not appropriate for planting. Such grant affected El Yegüero directly because, on the one hand, the signers consistently had

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<sup>150</sup> Luis G. Salas to Froilan Alvarez del Castillo. Minatitlan, Veracruz, July 3, 1917. AGEV/CAM, Municipality of Minatitlan, Box 29, File 28.



to face the complaints of the grantees in Santa Alejandrina, who demanded that El Yegüero cattle raisers build fences to keep their cattle. On the other, “the extermination and invasion [sic] of the enormous water disposal of the Refinery, which day and night spills contaminated water... that kills and burns vegetation.” Building a fence, such as the one that Santa Alejandrina neighbors demanded, would push vecinos of El Yegüero to have their cattle drink the contaminated water from the Refinery, “causing their death, like it [had] happened before.” However, they continued, if the government would push El Águila to spill their water waste into the Coatzacoalcos River and not inside El Yegüero, the cattle raisers would “commit to the sacrifice of enclosing our lands... As the grantees of Santa Alejandrina request.”<sup>151</sup>

Communities being affected by these conflicts tried to get the authorities involved to fight enclosures, but they also many times viewed such authorities as distant and aloof to what occurred in these areas. In Tampamachoco, for example, the community defended their right to remain on those lands by establishing that they had settled long before the British arrived: “we own houses [inside the federal zone] in which we have peacefully lived for over ten years, working as small merchants... and repairmen.”<sup>152</sup> The federal zone, they argued, was home to 150 families, had a market, municipal authorities, and tax-paying shops. The neighbors even began a lengthy legal case against El Águila, with an amparo petition that also included accusations against the federal government, the Ministry of Revenue, and the Ministry of War for aiding the British company in evicting the “invaders.”

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<sup>151</sup> Cattle ranchers of El Yegüero to President Lázaro Cárdenas, Governor of Veracruz Miguel Alemán, and the Chief of the Autonomous Agrarian Department. April 20, 1938. Santa Alejandrina file. AGEV/CAM, Box 700, File 3064.

<sup>152</sup> AGN/AOS, Exp. 803-e-10

In many cases when authorities did not respond and the legal path was not successful either, residents retaliated with actions similar to the ones companies used. In a telling example, agrarian activists of Salinas in Pánuco (northern Veracruz) put up a wire fence surrounding the oil pipe built by the Mexican Gulf Oil Company. According to the Minister of Industry and Commerce (Secretario of Industria y Comercio), the oil company had signed a lease over that territory, so he asked the Minister of the Interior (Secretario of Gobernación) to guarantee the free transit of Gulf Oil personnel.<sup>153</sup> The agraristas had built the fence to protect their animals and mark the area where the oil pipe was located. When confronted by the authorities, they asked the U.S. company to build a set of wooden doors in place of the fence, to which Gulf Oil refused.

Finally, the bitter disputes between oil companies and the surrounding communities many times resulted in further enclosures mainly based on a discourse that expressed the “dangers” that land invaders’ presence represented. In Tampamachoco, according to the letters that El Águila wrote to the Minister of War, squatters had threatened the company’s workers and executives, and had drawn firearms when the port captain had tried to vacate their homes.<sup>154</sup> Executives also pointed out that the occupied area had become a “a sanitary threat to the inhabitants of Tuxpan, because of the squatters’ lack of cleanliness” and that the houses they had built “are almost all houses of vice and places of distribution of alcoholic beverages.”<sup>155</sup> Another executive declared that the area was a “haven for vice, sloth, prostitution, and sedition... to protect the decorum

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<sup>153</sup> Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo to Secretaría de Bogernación. February 20, 1929. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 173, File 33.

<sup>154</sup> Letter to Francisco Diez Barroso. May 12, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910.

<sup>155</sup> G. Sánchez, General de División to M. Flores Jr. and Francisco Diez Barroso, May 12, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910

of our authorities and the rights of the good people of this region, we must destroy that center of bad habits and bad examples.”<sup>156</sup> Other reports stated that the squatters had built houses without land titles or permission from neither the government nor the company, and that “most of the constructions are places where alcohol is served and are houses of vice.”<sup>157</sup> In short, El Águila painted the “land invaders” as lewd individuals who not only threatened the economic development of the region by opposing the exploitation of oil, but who also rejected the attempts of the company and of the federal government to rid the Mexican population of its vices and backwardness.

As numerous historians have shown in different areas, capitalist enterprises tended to foster a paternalistic discourse that justified the regulation of workers’ time, entertainment, living arrangement, and family life.<sup>158</sup> Though in the case of the Mexican oil industry this control was not perhaps as evident or as prevalent as in other industries in Mexico or in other places of Latin America, it was not uncommon for these companies to portray the need to establish some control over the land as an act that would in fact protect people from their own impulses, which led them to drinking, gambling, and

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<sup>156</sup> Pemex Archive, Box 617, File 16910; AGN/AOS, Exp. 803-e-10.

<sup>157</sup> Pemex Archive, Box 617, Exp. 16910. In reality, the distribution of buildings in Tampamachoco was as follows: Of 96 houses that the squatters built, there were 15 pubs (cantinas), 3 small restaurants, 1 clothes shops, 2 small convenience stores, 1 inn, 2 barbershops, 3 parking garages, 1 butcher, 3 fishermen, 1 gambling house and 1 brothel. The rest were family homes. Allen Payne to Manuel Flores, April 10, 1922. Pemex Archive, Box 617, Exp. 16910.

<sup>158</sup> Most recent examples are, French, *A Peaceful and Working People*; Thomas Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender and Politics in Chile’s El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Mark Moberg, “Responsible Men and Sharp Yankees: The United Fruit Company, Resident Elites, and Colonial State in British Honduras,” in *Banana Wars: Power, Production, and History in the Americas*, ed. Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

prostitution. This is not entirely foreign to how other instances of enclosure have occurred in different regions of the world and for different purposes.

Scholars have suggested that the enclosure of common property initially served to “discipline a nascent proletariat” and traditionally came accompanied by a capitalist discourse that established who made “better” use of the land. Such discourse reflected the general idea that industrialization was better than subsistence agricultural practices, at the same time that it justified the administrative logic behind attempting to control people’s time and activities—as well as their bodies and their mobility, as scholars of postcolonialism and biopolitics have also explained.<sup>159</sup> The companies that operated in Mexico engaged in similar practices, though perhaps from less a paternalistic discourse than the one employed by motor companies in Brazil or mining enterprises in Chile, for instance. However, British and U.S. enterprises in Mexico did manage or at least contributed to change certain practices among its workers—they had to start wearing watches when companies declared that any tardiness would be punished with a day’s salary, to provide one typical example.<sup>160</sup> By physically restricting the access that Mexicans had to land and resources, then, the companies not only established control over property, but also over people’s mobility and communication, which in fact had deep implications for neighboring communities, including locals’ political participation and workers’ unionization, as the next section will show.

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<sup>159</sup> See, Sharad Chari, “State Racism and Biopolitical Struggle: The Evasive Commons in Twentieth-Century Durban, South Africa,” *Radical History Review* 108, 73-90.

<sup>160</sup> Ella Quintal, “Industria petrolera, migración y movilidad social en la zona de Poza Rica-Coatzintla, Veracruz,” B.A. Thesis, Universidad de Yucatán, 1981.

## Road Enclosures

Enclosing roads had similar practical implications than closing off land and water sources—protecting oil pipes and equipment from people who did not work for the companies; giving priority to the circulation of company trucks and cars; and protecting the roads themselves from excessive use. Foreign oil enterprises built a network of paths in Veracruz with the purpose of transporting equipment and personnel through different fields and providing communication between fields and nearby cities. However, the roads many times crossed municipal lands, for which the companies did not pay taxes and limited the circulation of residents of the oil communities, who could not use them at will.

Francisco Múgica, army general and a key political player during cardenismo, for example, documented these enclosures when he spent a few weeks in the northern part of Veracruz, visiting Lázaro Cárdenas—the chief of military operations of the Huasteca region since May of 1925. Cárdenas gave his friend a tour around the area, including the Cerro Azul-Tierra Blanca oil complex of which Múgica wrote lengthy reflections. He described the “imposing offices, the enormous storage tanks and a large town of three thousand people filled with foreigners and Mexicans, employees, and workers.”<sup>161</sup> He also described the network of roads that united this thriving town, Mata Redonda, with the surrounding oil fields.

To mobilize the enormous riches that the Mexican soil produced, said the general, there were pumping stations every 20 kilometers covering Cerro Azul, Zacamixtle, Los Naranjos, Juan Casiano, San Jerónimo, La Laja, Horcasitas, and Garrapatas. From Mata

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<sup>161</sup> Francisco J. Múgica, *Estos son mis apuntes* (México: CNA, 1997), 88.

Redonda, where the big refinery was located, to other large towns in the area one could drive on “a paved road of excellent conditions to travel by car.” Those roads, continued the general, were “of course closed by sections, each guarded by armed men (guardias blancas) who communicated by phone with the main terminal to ask if a person is allowed to pass or not.”<sup>162</sup> Judicial authorities pursuing a criminal, for example, were not allowed to use them. Neither could personnel from competing companies. Anyone who wished to access had to also pay a toll. The paths were built over difficult territory through which it was impossible to transit unless it was by foot and the guards prevented anyone who did not work for the company from crossing. In short, there was to be no communication between oil fields and towns without the companies’ authorization.

These road enclosures deeply disrupted the daily lives of residents in these communities. Some local authorities saw the control that oil companies exercised over the Mexican territory as “the most immoral action that has ever been taken in the oil zones of our country... To continue to allow the Huasteca Co. to enclose the roads,” affirmed a municipal president in northern Veracruz, “[is] like surrendering a portion of our territory, producing great damage to our national sovereignty.”<sup>163</sup> This quote is from a letter that several municipal presidents sent to complain about Huasteca Co.’s closing off of paths. The roads in question linked the congregation of Juan Felipe to the towns of Tuxpan, Temapache, Ozuluama, and Tancoco, and a road that crossed Cerro Azul to get to Tepetzintla and other settlements. Moreover, said the signers, the oil company hired

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<sup>162</sup> *Idem*, 86.

<sup>163</sup> Presidentes Municipales to the First Judge of Tampico Tamaulipas, AGEV/FF/IP, Box 172, File 19

armed guards to watch the fences and prevent anyone “who they dislike” to transit those paths.<sup>164</sup>

The common argument in these complaints was that enclosing the roads violated the citizenship rights of the locals. The closing off of these roads, the municipal president quoted initially continued, “prevents the inhabitants of the Country [sic], national or foreign, from enjoying a constitutional guarantee in a frank and absolute way, which represents the right that all men have to travel through the National Territory...”<sup>165</sup> The signers, then, pressured local tribunals to declare the illegality of these enclosures and grant local residents permission to transit the roads. They declared that Huateca Co.’s measures violated Article 28 of the constitution, even if the company had a government concession for oil exploitation, which may allow the exclusive use of some roads. Still, the actions undertaken by the oil company “violate[d] the Supreme Law of the Country [sic].” Furthermore, the Labor Law was also being defied, for it established that “no one can be denied of their right to exercise free transit through roads and paths that lead to work centers, nor can the transportation of merchandise that is needed in such places be stopped; except for alcoholic beverages.”<sup>166</sup> The response by Huasteca Co. focused on the company’s right to maintain the closure, for they had built “through their own effort and resources” the roads that were “either private property... Or on which there is a right *in rem* [*derecho real*]” of the company for transit.<sup>167</sup> The roads were also exclusive because

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<sup>164</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>165</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>166</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>167</sup> *Derecho real* or *ius in rem* refers to the right in property of an individual or corporation over an object. This right is vested through the use he made of the object. In the case of roads, the use of them provided oil companies with a property right that in many cases went undisputed in the courts.

the company wished to “prevent invasions by hostile and strange [foreign] elements to its property and to stop cattle from crossing from one property to another... Which is why the company also built doors in several sections of the cattle ranches that the roads often cross.”<sup>168</sup>

Similar issues occurred in other municipalities and the local authorities fought hard against the abuses of the companies, but they were well aware of their weaknesses. In 1929, for example, the municipal president of Pánuco stopped trucks belonging to the Mexican Petroleum Company, a U.S. operated enterprise, and demanded a contribution to the municipality’s taxes for road maintenance. The company representative complained to the Secretary of the Interior (Secretario de Gobernación) that the municipal presidents had “no authorization whatsoever to prevent the transit of company vehicles, and less so to order their detention inside the Company’s own property.”<sup>169</sup> The Huasteca Co. representative asked the Secretario to insure the company’s rights to transit “the roads we own” and to not be disturbed by the local authorities. To this, the municipal president responded that the Mexican Petroleum Company always tried to “elude paying the transit contributions (derecho de porteo)... [and] generally drive their trucks not only on private roads, but also on the municipality’s paths and through urban settlements.”<sup>170</sup>

The fact is municipal presidents in these areas usually did not have enough authority to carry out simple tasks like charging taxes and ensuring their constituent’s

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<sup>168</sup> Carlos Palomar y Arias to Jueces Primero de Distrito del Estado de Tamaulipas. Jalapa, Veracruz. July 3, 1925. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 172, File 19.

<sup>169</sup> Ignacio García Tellez, subsecretary of Gobernación, citing William L. Steele, representative of Mexican Petroleum Company, Pánuco, Ver. March 2, 1929. Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz, Fondo: Fomento/ Secretaría de Gobernación, Serie Tierras, (hereafter AGEV/FF/SEGOB/T), Box: 318, File 2.380(20)4.

<sup>170</sup> Pánuco municipal president to the Secretario de Gobernación, Pánuco, March 26, 1929. AGEV/FF/SEGOB/T: Box 318, File I 552 (12-2).



rights of transit. The vulnerability contributed to the irregularities and ambiguities regarding the control foreign oil enterprises held over the land. In the enclosure of the Juan Felipe and Cerro Azul roads described above, the representative of Huasteca Co. declared that because those paths were used for the exploitation of petroleum, “an activity that concerns the federal government exclusively, states and municipalities have no authority whatsoever... to give orders or dispositions” concerning this issue.<sup>171</sup> Another example is El Jopoy, where the municipal president got repeated orders from governor Tejeda, the agrarian authorities, and even president Pascual Ortiz Rubio to make sure that a grant provided to members of an Ejidal Committee was enforced in lands belonging to the Huasteca Oil Co. The municipal president finally recognized that he did not have sufficient manpower to enforce this grant because “...the Petroleum Company prevents it.”<sup>172</sup>

In these cases there was a constant debate regarding whose property rights should be upheld and the lack of clarity regarding whose jurisdiction—federal, state, or municipal—ruled over those cases. For the Juan Felipe and Cerro Azul dispute, Huasteca Co. representatives considered that “any order or disposition that tends to diminish this sacred property right [road enclosure], is harmful and must be contested through a judicial review.”<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, further complaints by Mexican citizens stated that keeping the paths closed translated into material damages to workers and landowners, “who can neither visit nor rent small properties that are completely isolated by the fences

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<sup>171</sup> Carlos Palomar y Arias to Juez Primero de Distrito del Estado de Tamaulipas. Jalapa, Veracruz. July 3, 1925. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 172, File 19.

<sup>172</sup> Manuel Fernández de Lara to Governor Adalberto Tejeda. Pánuco, Veracruz, July 22, 1932. AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipality of Pánuco, 1928. Box 268, File 775.

<sup>173</sup> Carlos Palomar y Arias to Juez Primero de Distrito del Estado de Tamaulipas. Jalapa, Veracruz. July 3, 1925. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 172, File 19.

installed by the company; visiting those properties has become impossible because the roads are closed.”<sup>174</sup>

Arguably, the rights of these proprietors were as “sacred” as those of the company. However, the state Supreme Court declared that “the free transit” on those roads would “undoubtedly cause great damages that would be hard to repair” for the company and that “conflagrations [sic] by any gas leaks in the oil pipes” would be produced as consequence of the public’s “ignorance and lack of care.” Lastly, the benefits that those who complained—including the state governor—had in mind by opening those roads were no more important than “the respect to [private] ownership... which is an individual guarantee consecrated by Articles 14 and 16 of the Constitution.” The Supreme Court upheld Huasteca Co.’s rights to enclose the roads.<sup>175</sup>

In sum, road enclosures occupied an important position in the oil communities’ discontent regarding the control that oil companies held over territory. It was in large part due to the bad living conditions in the oil fields and the arrogance with which foreign managers controlled the oil territories, that workers from different regions and employed in different companies concluded their process of unionization in 1935 by joining forces in one national oil workers’ union (Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana, STPRM).

The control that oil enterprises kept over space and means of communication affected the process of labor unionization in Veracruz, despite the fact that some regions saw a good share of activism early on. The southern municipalities of the state are good

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<sup>174</sup> Elias Montes López to Gonzalo Vázquez Veal. Pueblo Viejo, Veracruz. July 15, 1925. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 172, File 19.

<sup>175</sup> Transcript of Supreme Court Ruling. January 5, 1927. AGEV/FF/IP, Box 172, File 19.

examples of early union militancy, especially because workers from other industries who had been labor activists arrived to work at the refinery and distributed knowledge about the need to organize and demand better working and living conditions. The same occurred in Tampico, Tamaulipas, and El Ébano in San Luis Potosí.

Tampico, in particular, had become a hub for the Mexican working class, attracting thousands of laborers during the first decades of the twentieth century because the city not only produced oil, but was also an important mercantile port and had a large railroad station. In addition, the city became the destiny of many militants of communist and anarcho-syndicalist organizations, national and foreign, and some of the most important figures of the Casa del Obrero Mundial, who traveled through Veracruz in the 1920s encouraging workers to organize. The fact that close to 90 percent of the foreign oil companies that operated in Mexico had their main offices as well as numerous wells near Tampico, explains the importance of this region. Already in 1919, oil workers from Pierce Oil Company (later the Huasteca Oil Company) had united to demand salary raises in southern Tamaulipas, while in Minatitlán 15,000 laborers marched (and were subsequently repressed) to demand respect for the 1917 Constitution.

As a result, and because the Huasteca Co. controlled northern Veracruz and southern Tamaulipas, workers were more prone to communicate and travel from Tuxpan, Pánuco, and Poza Rica to Tampico, than to the south. Those who worked in smaller fields in the north, like Palma Sola, could hardly leave camp at all, despite the fact that Huasteca Co. had built a network of roads throughout northern Veracruz to transport machinery. In theory, those who wished to travel between the two states could do so through these roads. In practice, workers' mobility was greatly limited. Moreover,

workers who did get permission to leave and travel to other oil camps ran the risk of “disappearing” on the way, especially if they were suspect of being union militants. A delegate from the main Tampico section of El Águila union, for example, traveled to the fields of Poza Rica when production was first starting there. After holding some meetings with the workers, he left Poza Rica to return to Tampico, but he never made it to his destination. Laborers assumed he had been assassinated. Another union organizer, Santana Álvarez, was banned from traveling by train from Tampico to Poza Rica, so he walked the distance between the two places by foot more than once.<sup>176</sup>

But the unionization process was fragmented from the beginning of oil production in Mexico mostly due to the geographic distance between oil fields and because of the unrestricted power that the companies held in certain areas of Veracruz. In some fields of northern Veracruz, for example, workers’ militancy was much more reduced than in areas close to cities or where a refinery operated. The isolation of many oil camps did not permit laborers to communicate consistently. Such isolation also allowed companies to get away with much more repressive actions than in the south. In fact, workers in the northern field of Cerro Azul had already attempted strikes in 1916, only to be met with brutal beatings by the company’s private police. Most importantly, northern and southern Veracruz were not communicated at all, so laborers in the Huasteca region were many times unaware of the struggles and advances of their comrades in the south. The lack of passable roads and railroads from the center of the state to the Huasteca only made this situation worse.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Ella Quintal, “La sección 30 del STPRM (Poza Rica),” in *Los sindicatos nacionales. Petroleros*, 294-5.

<sup>177</sup> PEMEX, *El petróleo en Veracruz*, 51.

In sum, road enclosures were central in the oil communities' discontent regarding the control that oil companies held over territory. It was in large part due to the bad living conditions in the oil fields and the arrogance with which foreign managers controlled the oil territories, that workers from different regions and employed in different companies concluded their process of unionization in 1935 by joining forces in one national oil workers' union (Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana, STPRM). This labor movement pushed for and worked towards the oil expropriation that Cárdenas finally enforced in 1938.

The expropriation, symbolically and in practice, covered all the expectations of the revolutionary struggle: it demonstrated the government's official support to the rights of the industrial proletariat, it provided land restitution, and gave practical meaning to the notion of proprietary justice. But what occurred after the nationalization and the role of Mexican Petroleum as administrator of land in Veracruz did not perhaps go exactly as workers expected. The national company sometimes limited the community's access to land, housing, and other resources as well, helping to neutralize the disconformities that arose among oil workers after 1938. And sure enough, Pemex engaged in many of these practices of enclosure that the foreign companies had initiated.

## **Conclusion**

Those who have studied enclosures in other regions and other times have recognized that the privatization and commodification of land and other public goods previously recognized as collective, "closed off possibilities to those who had neither the economic means to buy valuable public resources like land... nor the social power to

challenge public life's new breed of private owners..."<sup>178</sup> To this, I would add that the creation of private property off communally held territory carried with it a strong power of exclusion. A very physical one like that enforced by the foreign oil companies in Mexico, which included fences to close off water wells, gates to limit transit on municipal roads, and walls to separate workers' camps from bosses' colonies. This changes in access to property, also constituted a metaphorical exclusion. The sentiments that Mexican petitioners expressed when they talked about being "colonized" or "conquered" by foreign oil managers represent this very clearly. It is true that the closing off of territory by these companies was not much different from the tools that capitalist enterprises have used in other industries in other regions of the globe—coffee, bananas, sugar, minerals, to name a few—but carried particular meanings in the Mexican context.

Indeed, the creation of these "foreign colonies" on Mexican ground had historical implications that echoed the abuses suffered by subordinated groups during the colonial period and did not go unnoticed by the oil communities of Veracruz. But in the context of the postrevolution such enclosures acquired new meanings that were related to the regime's patrimonialist rhetoric. How could the revolutionary government claim to defend the rights of the dispossessed and the economic sovereignty of the country, while the authorities allowed oil companies to limit people's mobility and regulate their living conditions? Moreover, how could communities claim any sort of inclusion in the postrevolutionary national project if they were excluded from occupying property over which in theory they had rights as Mexicans?

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<sup>178</sup> Chazkel, *Laws of Chance*, 166.

The revolutionary promises of land redistribution and the defense of the patrimony of the nation were outlined in the constitution of 1917. In the oil-producing areas of Veracruz, these revolutionary promises carried unique meanings. On the one hand, the demographic pressure in the oil fields—in large part due to immigration—and the radical agrarian ideologies that circulated in the state, made land possession a crucial element in the relationship that local communities developed between each other and with the state. On the other, the exploitation of petroleum by foreign companies and the subsequent nationalization of the industry, gave those who lived and worked in the oil fields a unique perspective of the laws that protected the property of the nation—one that was based on the idea that it was their task to safeguard the national property against foreign companies at the same time that they should benefit from that property. This task, however, was made difficult throughout the first decades of oil exploitation in Mexico due to the foreign companies' stubborn attempts to control the land, access to water, and the means of transportation in these areas.

### **Chapter 3: Oil Expropriation and Agrarian De-radicalization**

This chapter unveils the connection between the spread of agrarianism in the state of Veracruz during the 1920s and 30s, and the oil nationalization of 1938. Through a study of property legislation and political discourse regarding land rights, I show that the agrarian reform enforced after the revolution of 1910-1920 and the nationalization of the oil industry were two expressions of the same national project—one that strove to organize, regulate, and administer property rights in order to achieve political order after the revolution. In the early and mid-1930s, increasing amounts of people began making

agrarian petitions in areas destined for oil production, in part due to the expansion of agrarian ideology to the peripheries of Veracruz. These requests caused local authorities and oil companies considerable difficulties. Each granting or denial carried with it an inherent debate regarding the economic and social goals of the postrevolutionary governments. Authorities knew that land grants could affect oil production, but they were also aware of the fact that each rejection could be construed as a betrayal of the revolutionary promises of agrarian reform and land redistribution.

In this chapter, I suggest that through the nationalization of all oil assets, including lands, from foreign companies in 1938, the Cardenista regime avoided those strategic areas for the country's industrial growth from becoming part of the agrarian reform. In other words, the nationalization of the oil industry put those lands "off limits" by creating large areas of federal land that were to be administrated by Mexican Petroleum (Pemex). Such action essentially allowed the control of those lands without violating the revolutionary pact that had the agrarian reform at its center. I show here how the property laws of the 1930s gave the state the juridical basis to intervene in the economic life of the country, gaining control over the exploitation of petroleum and the redistribution of land, thus de-radicalizing agrarista and labor movements that had originated in the area during the 1920s.

As many have shown, the oil expropriation of 1938 was caused by labor and diplomatic conflicts. Its main result was the creation of a state company that centralized petroleum production and supported Mexico's industrialization program in the 1940s and



50s.<sup>179</sup> By expropriating the oil industry and creating Pemex, a state monopoly in charge of production and distribution, president Cárdenas killed several birds with one stone. First, the integration of the National Oil Workers' Union (STPRM) within the Pemex administration allowed and pushed laborers to solve their internal conflicts within the institution and not in bloody battles among local chapters.<sup>180</sup> Second, Pemex's Oil Administrative Council (Consejo Administrativo del Petróleo) assumed the responsibility of dealing with the land conflicts arising from oil exploitation and the expansion of strategic territories, relieving the federal government from the task of administering those lands directly. Third, the 1938 nationalization was a smart move to attract the loyalty of workers from all industries. By framing the action against foreign companies as vindication of the rights of Mexican laborers, Cárdenas was showing that the postrevolutionary state would risk an international conflict of potentially devastating consequences to enforce and defend constitutional article 123.<sup>181</sup> Lastly, by putting those lands under the control of Pemex, a government monopoly, Cárdenas essentially made them national patrimony, allowing the federal government, through Pemex, to regulate the use of oil lands and declare their importance for the industrial future of Mexico, making them unavailable for agrarian grants.

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<sup>179</sup> Some examples are Adleson, "Causalidad y conciencia"; Olvera, "Origen social"; Brown, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico*; Brown, "Acting for Themselves"; Brown and Peter Lender, "Trabajadores en el petróleo extranjero: México y Venezuela," in *Las inversiones extranjeras en América Latina, 1850-1930*, ed. Carlos Marichal (México: Colmex/FCE, 1995): 244-71; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*.

<sup>180</sup> See Olvera, "Los trabajadores ante la nacionalización," Idem. "The Rise and Fall of Union Democracy," in Brown and Knight, 63-89; Jaime Preciado Coronado, *Industria petrolera y movimientos sociales regionales* (Guadalajara, Méx: Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara, 1991).

<sup>181</sup> See Brown, *Oil and Revolution*; Idem. "Acting for Themselves."

The land petitions being made in the oil areas had one thing in common: a patriotic rhetoric that put the rights of Mexicans over those of foreigners and that reclaimed the promises that the postrevolutionary government had made citizens regarding their property rights. When Cárdenas made Pemex a looming presence in northern and southern Veracruz, land petitioners could no longer defend their rights in the oil areas as a patriotic act against foreign capitalists, as their actions became an affront to the state after Pemex took charge. At the same time, the federal government began gaining clear political control over Veracruz by the mid 1930s, after years of fearing the power of local agrarian guerrillas (*agraristas*) and recalcitrant governors.<sup>182</sup> Also, political radicalism greatly diminished after 1940. Was this reduction one result of the nationalization of the oil industry? To answer this question I argue that the PNR's interventionist agenda outlined in the *Six Year Plan* and carried out through the 1934 Agrarian Code and the 1936 Expropriation Law not only gave juridical and ideological basis to the oil nationalization of 1938, but it also opened the path to policies that guaranteed the political control of Veracruz by the federal government. This perspective allows me to go beyond the traditional labor-centered approach to the expropriation of the oil industry and see it as an issue of property rights where the agrarian reform had a more important effect than is usually believed.

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<sup>182</sup> See Antonio Santoyo, *La Mano Negra. Poder regional y Estado en México* (Veracruz, 1928-1943) (México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1995); Martín Aguilar Sánchez, "Las luchas sociales en el estado de Veracruz," in Aguilar Sánchez and Ortiz Escamilla; Paul Gillingham, "Who Killed Crispín Aguilar? Violence and Order in the Postrevolutionary Countryside," in *Violence, Coercion and State Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: the Other Half of the Centaur*, edited by Wil G. Pansters (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) 91-111.

The first section of the chapter describes the political and social instability that followed the fall of governor Adalberto Tejeda in 1933. Here I explain the agrarian struggles that expanded to the peripheries of Veracruz and the violence that people migrating to the oil areas experienced every day. The second part analyzes pre-Cardenista agrarian and subsoil legislation, and the laws enforced by Cárdenas during his presidential period, especially the *Six Year Plan*. Finally, through an overview of the conflicts between the Mexican government and the foreign oil companies from 1917 to 1938 I show that, more than the result of a labor dispute, this nationalistic action was in fact an issue of property rights both in the federal and local realms.

### **Adalberto Tejeda and the Radicalization of Peasants and Workers**

During the 1920s and early 30s, Veracruz was the stage for some of the most intense agrarian struggles in the country, which occurred mainly during the two gubernatorial periods of Adalberto Tejeda, from 1920 to 1924 and from 1928 to 1932. Tejeda, army colonel, federal deputy and senator, and military commander of northern Veracruz during the revolution, was an early supporter of agrarian redistribution and by the time he reached the governorship, Veracruz had already become in many ways the cradle of Mexico's labor and peasant radical movements.<sup>183</sup> In 1907, textile workers

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<sup>183</sup> General information about political radicalism in Veracruz is based on the following works: Falcón, *El agrarismo en Veracruz*; Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism in Veracruz* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978); Idem. "Orígenes laborales de la organización campesina en Veracruz," *Historia Mexicana* 20 no. 2 (October-December, 1970): 235-64; Miles Rodríguez, "The Beginnings of a Movement: Leagues of Agrarian Communities, Unions of Industrial Workers, and their Struggles in Mexico, 1920-1929." PhD. Diss. Harvard University, 2010; Domínguez, *Política y movimientos sociales*; Falcón and García Morales, *La semilla en el surco*; Alfonso Hernández Pérez ed. *Historia de las comunidades agrarias del Estado de Veracruz* (Xalapa: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1992); José Rivera Castro, "Política agraria, organizaciones, luchas

declared a strike in Río Blanco, western Veracruz, which expanded to neighboring factories, and that president Porfirio Díaz repressed violently. Considered one of the igniting events of the revolution of 1910, this strike also marked a crucial moment in the history of Mexican labor relations because of its ideological underpinnings. Led by members of the Mexican Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Mexicano) and staunch followers of the Flores Magón brothers, the Río Blanco strike gave way to widespread labor organizing in the rest of the state. By 1915, unions of textile, tram, and tobacco workers had been founded in Veracruz. The next year, Veracruz received the members of the First Preliminary Workers' Congress, a direct precursor of the massive Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana, CROM), founded in 1918.

When Adalberto Tejeda assumed gubernatorial powers in 1920, he soon began pushing for the formation and unification of agrarian committees, and allowed the Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista Mexicano, PCM) to function and recruit members in the cities and the countryside. The main figures in this development were Úrsulo Galván and Manuel Almanza. Founders of the Veracruz branch of the PCM, they had collaborated with anarcho-syndicalist groups, many of them formed at Antorcha

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y resistencias campesinas entre 1920 y 1928,” and “Veracruz: Organización y radicalismo campesino,” in *Actores sociales en un proceso de transformación: Veracruz en los años veinte*, Ed. Manuel Reyna Muñoz (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1996), 191-222; Eitan Ginzberg, “Ideología, política y la cuestión de las prioridades: Lázaro Cárdenas y Adalberto Tejeda, 1928-1934,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13:1 (1997); Aurora Mónica Alcayaga Sasso, “Librado Rivera y los Hermanos Rojos en el movimiento social y cultural anarquista en Villa Cecilia y Tampico, Tamaulipas, 1915-1931,” PhD Diss. Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico, 2006; Jeffrey Bortz, *Revolution Within the Revolution: Cotton Textile Workers and the Mexican Labor Regime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Aurora Gómez Galvarriato, *Industry and Revolution: Social and Economic Change in the Orizaba Valley, Mexico* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Libertaria—the English school founded by Manuel Díaz Ramírez that became the main center for the study and discussion of Marxist texts and the training ground for communists leaders in the country. Galván, Almanza, and Herón Proal coincided at Antorcha and went on to aid in the unionization efforts of workers in oil enclaves—Tampico and Minatitlán most notably—during the late 1910s. Later on they led the tenants’ strike in the Port of Veracruz and formed the state Peasant League. This varied and intense ideological environment developed at a moment when a number of social problems plagued the state. Landlessness and poverty among small peasants, as well as overpopulation and disease in the cities, added to a general sense of disenfranchisement and lack of representation among the population. An illuminating example of how political ideology, social unrest, and inequality meshed during the early 1920s is the tenant’s strike of 1922.

During the early 1920s, Veracruz and other cities faced serious problems to accommodate a growing population composed mainly by members of the proletarian classes. On the one hand, the lack of hygiene and safety in the shacks and rooms that landlords rented kept families living in dismal conditions. “...those rooms are uninhabitable...” reported *El Dictamen de Veracruz*, “there are two toilets for the one hundred and fifty people who live [in those rooms] and they are inconceivably disgusting.” Two government commissioners sent to the shacks to study the conditions supposedly interviewed a man who lived “in a room no bigger than a casket, where he cannot lie down because there is no room for a bed.”<sup>184</sup> There was neither regulation nor oversight of rent prices, so landlords charged very high rents and had the right to expel

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<sup>184</sup> *El Dictamen de Veracruz*, May 14, 1922.

any tenant who did not pay on time. Landlords charged 15 to 60 pesos a month (\$15 a day or \$150 monthly for sex workers) in 1922, a stark rise from the \$5 to \$15 they charged in 1915. Considering that the minimum wage in the Gulf area of Mexico during that period was approximately \$1 a day (with some people making less than that) rents were clearly very high, especially considering the conditions in which these rooms and shacks were built.

Facing high rents, no rights, and dismal living conditions, isolated tenants—among them a large group of sex workers who were the most affected by the rent increases—went on strike, refusing to pay rent until landlords addressed their hygiene and safety concerns. Rapidly, these movements grew under the organizational control of the Communist Party. Herón Proal, one of the staunchest PCM members in the Port of Veracruz, organized and coordinated the local efforts, forming the Revolutionary Tenants' Union (Sindicato Revolucionario de Inquilinos) which Galván and Almanza soon joined. Based “on a vague amalgam” of anarchist, Marxist, and Leninist principles, the strike extended beyond the Port, empowering poor families, sex workers, and industrial laborers in a society where 95% of property was owned by 1% of the population formed by landowning elite families.<sup>185</sup>

Although Tejeda and his collaborators did not directly support the strike, they did not repress it either. In fact, inspired by governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto of Yucatán,

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<sup>185</sup> For more on the tenants' strike see, Rafael Ortega (Leafar Agetro), *Las luchas proletarias. Historia y autocrítica* (Xalapa, Méx: Editorial Barricada, 1942), 67-93; Octavio García Mundo, *El movimiento inquilinario en Veracruz* (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1976); José Mancisidor, *La ciudad roja. Novela proletaria* (México: Universidad Veracruzana, 1995); Andrew Grant Wood, *Revolution in the Street: Women, Workers, and Urban Protest in Veracruz, 1870-1927* (Wilmington: SR Books, 2001), 93-108.

Tejeda sought to form a tenants' union guided by the state government, but the involvement of the PCM and other groups of anarchist sympathies radicalized the movement and the governor lost his grip on the strikers, who were around 30,000 by late 1922, according to the international press.<sup>186</sup> Moreover, the PCM leadership saw the tenants' strike as a trampoline to wider communist participation in the postrevolutionary political order, which would have upset the precarious equilibrium that the Sonora group was slowly achieving in the country's regional politics and in its diplomacy with the United States.

During the weeks following the first strikes, Proal made several attempts to form a communist colony, taking materials from abandoned houses or buildings under construction; strikers even "expropriated" them from businesses that sold construction materials. Tejeda's support for the movement continued to be ambiguous. In some cases he authorized the formation of communist colonies in the city, providing them with plots and negotiating with municipal authorities on their behalf. In other, he allowed those same authorities to obtain the support of the federal army to protect the rights of landlords, large property owners, and elite families in the Port.<sup>187</sup> These property owners formed a tight and strong group of capitalists who held their share of political clout, especially in the city of Veracruz itself, and who formed the Union of Proprietors to fight the tenants.

The situation in Veracruz was becoming uncontrollable due to Proal's success in gathering increasing numbers of strikers and his efforts to spread the movement throughout Veracruz and other cities in the Republic. He had in fact declared in mid-

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<sup>186</sup> Gracia Mundo, *Movimiento*, 47-53; Falcón, *El agrarismo*, 33.

<sup>187</sup> *Idem*, 122-23.

1922, “in little time, the whole Republic will burn.” At the same time, president Obregón was facing similar reformist movements in Yucatán, Tabasco, and Tamaulipas supported by their respective governors.<sup>188</sup> In response to the radicalism that the movement showed in Veracruz and taking advantage of the fact that Tejeda left the state for Mexico City in July of 1922, Obregón sent the federal army to repress Tenants’ Union protesters and to incarcerate Proal. True figures are unknown, but sources indicate that over one hundred people were killed in the confrontations.<sup>189</sup> The movement continued after the massacre, but without Proal and facing the continuous repression of the federal government, it lost considerable power. Tejeda, however, continued to support their struggle by publishing the Tenants’ Law (Ley de Inquilinato) of 1923, which provided some guarantees to renters.

After the tenants’ strike was disbanded, Galván and Almanza maintained their organizational efforts and moved the struggle to the countryside, focusing on the creation of a statewide agrarian league. Proal had already dedicated funds to the formation of the Organizational Peasant Commission (Comisión Organizadora de la Central Campesina) before his incarceration, so Galvan and Almanza used the Peasant Commission to begin connecting rural committees and encouraging the creation of a strong front against big landowners for the process of land redistribution. These efforts were consistently backed by Tejeda, who very quickly was able to unite his own interest in enforcing an agrarian reform in Veracruz and his need for the support of a strong social base for his political project.

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<sup>188</sup> Falcón, *El agrarismo*, 34.

<sup>189</sup> Idem and García Mundo, *Movimiento*, 171.



As such, with help from communist leaders and labor organizers Galván and Almanza, Tejeda founded the State League of Agrarian Communities (Liga de Comunidades Agrarias de Veracruz, LCAV), in 1923. The goal of this organization was to aid potential ejido petitioners face the bureaucratic process of land redistribution, especially considering that neither the 1917 Constitution nor the 1920 Ejido and 1922 Regulatory Laws left clear what type of organizational form these communities should take to petition and administer ejido lands.<sup>190</sup> Essentially, only those communities who could prove their “political category” (categoría política) as *pueblos*, *rancherías*, *condueñazgos*, *congregaciones*, and *comunidades* could petition for lands. The problem with this categorization was that it was both vague and arbitrary. Settlements that shared the same category could have entirely distinct land needs. Additionally, of a group of communities sharing essentially the same characteristics only some obtained their political category, while others did not.<sup>191</sup> Therefore, it became necessary to offer dispossessed populations the option to make their petitions through a peasant organization without having to fulfill the requirement of the political category.

Campesino Leagues sprung in other regions of Mexico and were later grouped in one big National Agrarian League. What made the LCAV distinct, however, was the direct involvement of the governor in the organization’s administration and acquisition of power. The League became dependent of Tejeda’s leadership and Tejeda began relying increasingly on the organization’s political support. The governor allowed the League to reach most regions of the state through the election (and many times imposition) of

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<sup>190</sup> Rodríguez, 10.

<sup>191</sup> Idem, 12. Also, “Código Agrario de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos,” in *Cinco siglos*.

agrarian leaders for the posts of state representatives and municipal presidents.<sup>192</sup> The Veracruz Peasant League gathered representatives of agrarian congregations and union organizers to form a unified front against large landowners who were resisting agrarian reform in the state. In the end, LCAV became the most effective partnership for agrarian organizing and leadership in 1920s Mexico.<sup>193</sup>

Throughout his career, Tejeda insisted that Veracruz's two main problems were land concentration and the foreign control over the country's natural resources. He considered that by expropriating haciendas and distributing them as ejidos, and returning oil lands to indigenous communities, Veracruz and the rest of the country would be "in a direct path toward economic growth and political stability."<sup>194</sup> Tejeda confronted the first issue head on by enforcing a massive agrarian reform, but historian David Skerritt has shown that this process was far from fair or uniform. The local government tended to concentrate those grants depending on the "correlations of power among peasants, landowners, and the political priorities of the state and federal governments."<sup>195</sup> During the same period, retired revolutionary generals acquired large portions of land and opposed agrarian reform in those central areas, joining forces with the older landowning elite to form the Union of Cattle Ranchers and Farmers. Municipal authorities unfriendly with Tejeda often backed up these efforts to stop the granting process and thwart the

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<sup>192</sup> Ginzberg, 61.

<sup>193</sup> Rodriguez, 17.

<sup>194</sup> "Political Situation – Month of May, 1932 By Consular Districts," Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Mexico, 1930-1939, National Archive and Records Administration, Microfilm Collection, Columbia University, 812.00/29739 (hereafter DS-NARA).

<sup>195</sup> David Skerritt, "Tierra y sociedad en el siglo XX," in Aguilar Sánchez and Ortiz Escamilla, 458-9. For detailed numbers of land redistribution by gubernatorial period see, Falcón, *Agrarian Radicalism*, 100-1.

Local Agrarian Commission's surveying and distributing tasks. Landowners and army generals also began supplying weapons among guardias blancas to prevent grantees from occupying territory.<sup>196</sup>

As protection against these actions, Tejeda armed peasants who were willing to form guerrillas and fight to the death defending the agrarian reform. These guerrillas supported the efforts of the Local Agrarian Commissions and the Peasant League to redistribute land and create ejidos, they offered villagers a defense against the guardias blancas employed by the oil companies and large hacendados, and they many times forced large landowners to accept the resolutions of the Commissions.<sup>197</sup>

Aided by these agrarista guerrillas, Tejeda redistributed more land than any other governor in the country during the same period. During his first tenure, he signed 154 provisional resolutions that ordered the distribution of 160 190 hectares to 23 938 beneficiaries. In his second period, the governor approved 493 provisional resolutions, expropriating 334 493 hectares that benefitted 48 989 petitioners. These figures, plus the ca. 241 000 hectares that Tejeda granted as provisional possessions, added to approximately 495 000 hectares for 60 930 grantees in a period of eight years. This represented three quarters of all the land distributed in Veracruz between 1915 and

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<sup>196</sup> Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*, 37.

<sup>197</sup> For more on general violence in Veracruz, see De la Peña, *Veracruz Económico*; Falcón and García, *La semilla en el surco*; Aguilar Sánchez and Ortiz Escamilla; Santoyo, *La Mano Negra*; Paul Gillingham, "Force and Consent in Mexican Provincial Politics: Guerrero and Veracruz, 1945-1953," D.Phil, Oxford, 2005; Verónica Oikión Solano & Marta Eugenia García Ugarte, *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX* (Morelia, Méx: Colegio de Michoacán/CIESAS, 2008). Gillingham, "Who Killed Crispín Aguilar?"; Domínguez Pérez, *Política y movimientos sociales*; Rodríguez, "The Beginnings of a Movement."

1933.<sup>198</sup> Lázaro Cárdenas, in contrast, though also known for the widespread redistribution that he pushed in the state of Michoacán during his 1928-1932 governorship, signed only 400 provisional resolutions, granting 408 807 hectares to 24 000 beneficiaries.<sup>199</sup>

Returning oil lands to communities was a different matter. Governor Tejeda had many times expressed the opinion that no concessions should be given to foreign oil companies in Veracruz and had no difficulty confronting the U.S. and British oil capitalists on issues of labor rights and land displacement.<sup>200</sup> Even during his tenure as federal senator, he opposed any legislation that considered the possibility of respecting foreign oil companies' right to keep lands obtained before 1917.<sup>201</sup> He also made some attempts at limiting the power of the companies on Veracruz territory while he was governor, with little success.

A good example of such attempts is an episode occurred in February of 1929, when the Official Gazette of the state of Veracruz published that governor Tejeda had declared the expropriation of the lands next to the Minatitlán refinery with the object of building a workers' colony.<sup>202</sup> The expropriation decree was based on the following considerations: El Águila, did not abide by articles 123 of the federal constitution, 128 of the local constitution, and article 40 of the Labor Law, which stipulated that companies

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<sup>198</sup> Fowler Salamini, "Adalberto Tejeda and the Veracruz Peasant Movement," in *Contemporary Mexico: Papers of the IV International Congress of Mexican History*, edited by James W. Wilkie, et al. (Berkeley and Mexico City: University of California Press/El Colegio de México, 1973), 288.

<sup>199</sup> Idem

<sup>200</sup> Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*, 33.

<sup>201</sup> Idem, 34.

<sup>202</sup> Letter from Xavier Icaza to Manuel Flores, February 23, 1929, Pemex Archive, Box 3464, File 85681.

were obligated to provide safe and hygienic living quarters for workers; the workers, for lack of knowledge or resources, built dwellings that were unhygienic, constituting a danger for the entire community; El Águila Petroleum Company owned large extensions of unused territory next to the refinery, so the fact that these areas remained unexploited was a violation of fraction IV of article 27 of the 1917 constitution:

Commercial stock companies may not acquire, hold, or administer rural properties. Companies of this kind that are organized to operate any manufacturing, mining, or petroleum industry or for any other purpose that is not agricultural, may acquire, hold, or administer lands only of an area that is strictly necessary for their buildings or services, and this area shall be fixed in each particular case by the Federal or State Executive.<sup>203</sup>

Lastly, building homes for workers was a question of public utility and given the location of the refinery, the terrains that surrounded it were ideal for this purpose.<sup>204</sup>

After the decree was published in the Gazette, the lawyers for El Águila rushed to the governmental palace to find out the legal process through which this measure had taken place, since it went “against everything” they had discussed with “the governor, the secretary of government, and the Labor Department.”<sup>205</sup> They quickly began a process of amparo, which was taken to the state court of the Port of Veracruz. Apparently, Tejeda and the chair of the state Labor Department, not following the legal and bureaucratic procedures that were necessary for any process of expropriation, had made the decision. As such, El Águila took the case to the state court. The final verdict indicated that the

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<sup>203</sup> Fraction IV, Article 27. Mexican Constitution of 1917, English version  
<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/mexico/1917-Constitution.htm>

<sup>204</sup> Paraphrasing of the text appeared in the *Official Gazette of the State of Veracruz*, February 8, 1929.

<sup>205</sup> Letter from Xavier Icaza to Manuel Flores, February 23, 1929, Pemex Archive, Box 3464, File 85681.

state government had overran the federal jurisdiction by declaring the expropriation of lands that were deemed for public utility because of the oil deposits that were known to exist there. The second reason for the ruling was that Tejeda had violated state laws by not following the relevant procedures. The Veracruz court, then, allowed El Águila to remain in control of those lands until 1938, the year of the national oil expropriation.

In sum, the many interests that collided in the petroleum industry limited most of Tejeda's actions. Throughout his two tenures the colonel pushed for a series of reforms that would allow state governors to expropriate land for the common good, i.e. for public use, but because oil production was considered of "public utility" (roughly, those resources and infrastructure that benefit the national community), which only the federal government has the authority to expropriate, he could not exercise any action over petroleum-producing lands. Tejeda's alliance with the workers' unions was not as solid as the relationship he had built with his peasant guerrillas and though many of the same organizers led both the peasant league and workers' coalitions, they did not become strong enough to overcome the control that foreign oil companies held in the region until the late 1930s.<sup>206</sup>

During the last years of Tejeda's tenure as governor of Veracruz, he made numerous enemies in the federal government, among them Plutarco Elías Calles. Tejeda had been encouraged to run for president as the candidate for the Mexican Socialist Party by peasant and labor organizations in 1933 and during his presidential campaign he was consistently critical of the PNR and of Calles. He accused the Jefe Máximo of "interfering by attempting to check the advance of the people toward the realization of

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<sup>206</sup> Ortega; Falcón and García; Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*; Rodríguez.

their future.” He also condemned Calles’s attempts at creating an “institutional government”—the PNR—with the purpose of remaining the power behind the throne.<sup>207</sup> He additionally criticized the *Plan Sexenal* because it made “very little provision for the proletariat in Mexico.” Moreover, Tejeda’s promise to amend the Constitution “to conform to the views of the extreme lefts” produced anxiety among the PNR leadership.<sup>208</sup> He was considered a threat to the stability and power of the party and all of Tejeda’s efforts to continue climbing the political ladder were thwarted. Some in the PNR even considered him a Communist threat and vowed to see him finished. Then, in 1934 Tejeda’s sympathizers were shunned from the official party for refusing to “observe the discipline of the P.N.R.,” as deputy Carolino Anaya and others experienced.<sup>209</sup>

Having had enough of Tejeda’s open criticism to the government’s agrarian policies and fearing the strength of his peasant league, Calles ordered the disarmament of the rural guerrillas of Veracruz in 1933. The argument was that “it was inexpedient for peasants to remain armed when sufficient federal troops were available,” but the move was clearly a blow against Tejeda’s presidential ambitions.<sup>210</sup> Calles and president Abelardo Rodríguez ordered Cárdenas, who had become Minister of War in 1933, to oversee the operation from his post in Mexico City. The disarmament itself was violent enough in some parts of the state (U.S. consul Reuben Clark Jr. reported that numerous agraristas, as well as military commanders, were killed during the disarmament) and the fact that hacendados and guardias blancas were allowed to keep their weapons produced

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<sup>207</sup> Tejeda quoted in Josephus Daniels report to the Secretary of State, DS-NARA, 812.00/29974

<sup>208</sup> DS-Mexico, NARA: 812.00/29754, September 1, 1932 and Tejeda quoted in Josephus Daniels to the Secretary of State, DS-Mexico NARA: 812.00/30011.

<sup>209</sup> Josephus Daniels to the Secretary of State, DS-NARA, 812.00/29941.

<sup>210</sup> Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*, 116-8.

an imbalance of forces during the mid-1930s that left agraristas at a frank disadvantage. The federal army also began expelling settlers off hacienda lands and obligating renters to pay their dues, making “owners of ranches in the State of Veracruz very optimistic.”<sup>211</sup>

After losing the presidential election to Lázaro Cárdenas, Tejeda stayed in Veracruz, but retired from political life, though he made occasional public appearances that were reported in the local and national press. The colonel’s departure left a deep void in the political organization of peasant groups and fragmented Veracruz’s Agrarian League. Moreover, soon after the disarmament of the guerrillas, big landowners and guardias blancas began a terror campaign against agraristas, killing entire families and erasing whole villages. A week after Tejeda’s end of term, lands that had been distributed to agraristas were being returned to “their legitimate owners, who enjoy[ed] the guarantees to which they [were] entitled by the federal government and the military.”<sup>212</sup> Famously violent caciques Manuel Parra and Crispín Aguilar regained control over large portions of Veracruz and manipulated local politics to their advantage.<sup>213</sup>

All this coincided with the moment when the oil workers’ local unions were beginning to raise their heads to form a national organization and fight for collective contracts after having faced the foreign companies’ guardias blancas—and many times the government as well—in bloody battles. Tejeda’s fall, then, contributed to a peak of violence that came at a very inconvenient moment for the national project of land distribution, industrialization, and general pacification of radical groups. At the same time, agrarian struggles continued to occur in Veracruz, moving from the center of the

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<sup>211</sup> DS-Mex: 812.00/29819, January 21, 1933. Also, Falcón, *El agrarismo*, 116-7; Falcón and García, 327.

<sup>212</sup> U.S. Consul in Veracruz to the Department of State, in Falcón, *El Agrarismo*, 146.

<sup>213</sup> See Santoyo; Gillingham, “Who Killed Crispín Aguilar?”



state, where conservative forces held the upper hand, to the peripheries, where there was in theory more room for agraristas to operate, but where the oil companies also held a good amount of control. The federal government increased its presence in the state then, following its new tenet of economic and political intervention with the purpose of pacifying the countryside.

### **Land Conflicts on the Oil Fields**

Veracruz oil territories went considerably unaffected during the revolution of 1910 or by the first agrarian radicalism of the 1920s.<sup>214</sup> Though revolutionary troops occupied oil fields and pushed foreign companies into forced loans, oil production remained stable and during certain periods it in fact grew, as Haber, Razo, Maurer, and Brown have shown. Investment in oil exploration and production also grew during the revolution. In 1912, for example, mining investments were of approximately \$250 million, compared to the \$15 million invested in the oil industry. By 1919, oil was up to \$200 million, while mining had decreased to \$222 million.<sup>215</sup>

As Figure 4 shows, it was not until the mid-1920s, when production began a stark decrease.<sup>216</sup> At its highest, the Mexican oil industry produced close to 200 000 barrels a day. The starkest decrease occurred between 1923 and 1926, and production continued to descend until 1933 when it hit its lowest point, at ca. 30 000 barrels daily. After the 1932 Poza Rica discovery, oil production grew steadily until 1938, though never at the levels of the previous decade. Up until 1937, Mexico did not produce more than 45 000 barrels a day.

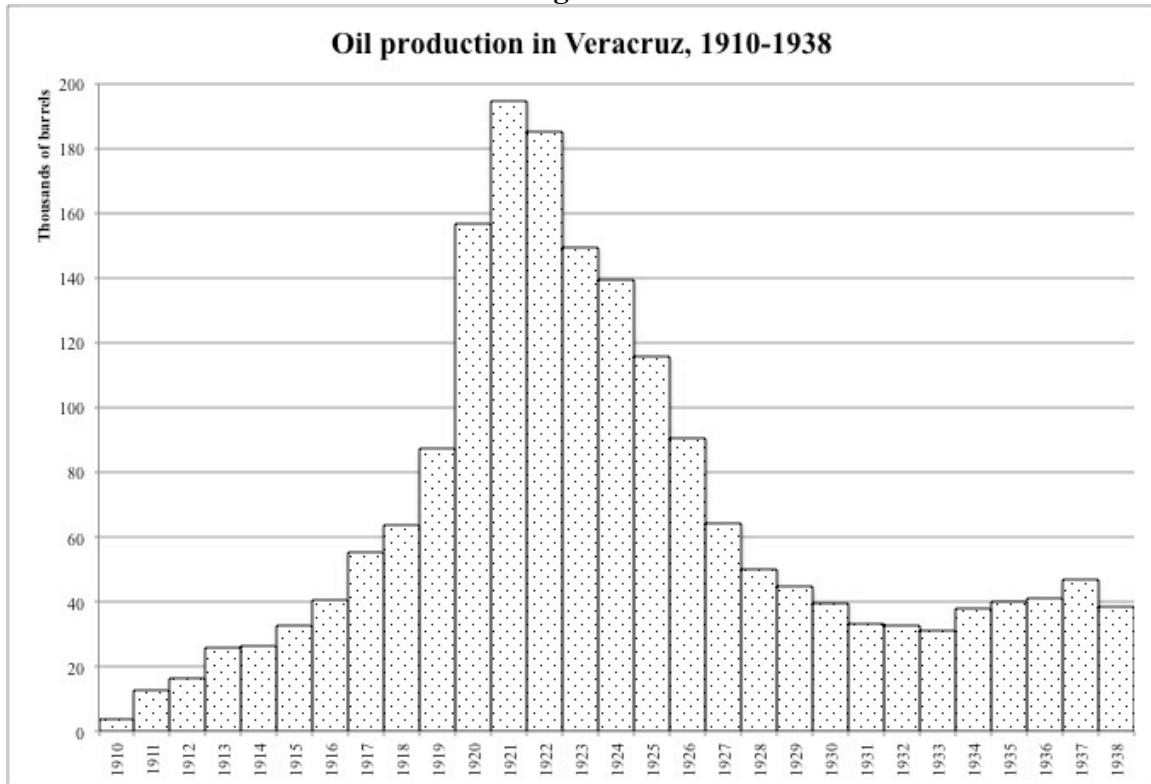
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<sup>214</sup> See, Jonathan Brown, "Why Foreign"; Serna, *La vida rural*, 186-250.

<sup>215</sup> Durán, "Pemex: The Trajectory of a National Oil Policy," in Brown and Knight, 153.

<sup>216</sup> Brown, "Why Foreign," 369.

Figure 4



Source: Author's own elaboration based on: Haber, Razo, and Maurer, *The Politics of Property Rights*, 199.

The areas of oil production, however, become subject to social conflicts during the 1930s, when yield began to increase again after a dramatic fall during the previous decade. Migrants from other regions of Mexico arrived to Veracruz searching for jobs on the petroleum fields and in many cases took over lands that belonged to British and American oil companies. Such invasions occurred since the beginning of oil exploitation in Mexico during the 1910s, but while the number of people migrating to the oil areas of Veracruz increased in the late twenties, so did the invasions and the formal agrarian

petitions to the National Agrarian Commission (CNA).<sup>217</sup> In Veracruz most land grants during the 1920s had occurred in the center of the state simply because there were not enough people in the peripheries who made land petitions. However, the move from the traditional zones of oil extraction in Veracruz (Minatitlán, Tuxpan) to the opening of new fields in Poza Rica in the north and Las Choapas on the frontier with Tabasco, contributed to the increase in oil production of the early 1930s and to the population growth in those regions.

Invasions in southern and northern Veracruz and ejidal requests by landless peasants and recalcitrant workers could not mean good news for the company. During the previous years numerous land takeovers and agrarian petitions had already occurred in Tuxpan, Coatzacoalcos, Cosoleacaque, and Ixhuatlán. The Mixed Agrarian Commission in Veracruz registered the following petitions: Agua Dulce, municipality of Puerto México, 1931; Las Choapas and Rancho Nuevo, municipality of Minatitlán, 1932; Buenavista, municipality of Tuxpan, 1933; Jagüey, municipality of Minatitlán, 1936; Cangrejera, municipality of Ixhuatlán del Sureste, 1938.<sup>218</sup> Occasionally, takeovers took place because, until the release of the Agrarian Code of 1934, only those who lived in settlements that had been granted political category—*rancherías* or *pueblos*, for example—or the category of “population nuclei” (*núcleos de población*) were allowed to request lands through the agrarian commissions.

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<sup>217</sup> See Fowler Salamini, *Movilización campesina*; Falcón, *El agrarismo*; Falcón and García Morales; Domínguez, *Política y movimientos*; Kourí, *A Pueblo*; Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*; Serna, *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural*.

<sup>218</sup> Respectively, AGEV/CAM: Box 394, File 1384; Box 490, File 1864; Box 890, file 1791; Box 550, File 2207; Box 671, File 2895; Box 737, File 3305.

In 1936, for example, two El Águila executives exchanged correspondence that discussed “some squatters [that] have cut down trees behind the Sanitary Unit in Las Choapas... [They] refuse to leave the area and stop cutting the trees.” El Águila’s manager, Mr. Riddell, expressed his certainty that further invasions could only be prevented if El Águila built more workers’ homes. “At least one hundred,” he said.<sup>219</sup> In July of the same year, a group of peasants filed a petition to the National Agrarian Commission to obtain the plot of Santa Alejandrina, in southern Veracruz, as an ejido. Attorney Miguel Ángel Cordera, employed by El Águila, sent a letter to the Commission stating that through those predios ran the companies’ oil pipes. “Next to Santa Alejandrina,” he added, “El Águila owns sports fields... for the encouragement of employees’... physical and moral well being.” Moreover, because the Oil Law of 1925 considered the oil industry of public utility, Cordera argued, no other activity had precedence over it. “Therefore, the CNA should avoid those terrains from being affected [by the agrarian reform].”<sup>220</sup>

In similar fashion, communities in San Cristobal, in the municipio of Minatitlán, requested lands belonging to El Águila in 1932.<sup>221</sup> In the same year, agrarian authorities reported that neighbors of Barranca and Rancho Nuevo, in Cosoleacaque and Minatitlán respectively, were in constant struggle over the surrounding agricultural areas. One engineer from the Local Agrarian Commission informed his superiors that neighbors suggested providing Rancho Nuevo with lands that belonged to El Águila instead of

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<sup>219</sup> Letter from Riddell to I.D. Bain, December 27, 1937. Pemex Archive, Fondo Expropiación, File 14369.

<sup>220</sup> Santa Alejandrina file, AGEV/CAM, Box 700, File 3064.

<sup>221</sup> AGEV/CAM, San Cristóbal o Cocuite, Municipio de Minatitlán. Box 537, File 2138.

reducing the Barranca ejidos.<sup>222</sup> In Agua Dulce, Puerto México (now Coatzacoalcos), peasants requested ejidal lands to the Local Agrarian Commission in 1931, while the same occurred in Las Choapas, in 1932.<sup>223</sup> These were all lands that belonged to El Águila or its real estate subsidiary, the Compañía Mexicana de Bienes Inmuebles. Such conflicts were not limited to the south of the state. In Jopoy, near Pánuco, the agrarian authorities expropriated and granted lands belonging to the Mexican Petroleum Company to fifty families.<sup>224</sup>

Despite these requirements, potential ejido owners would many times settle in an area and only then request their legal category to state governors.<sup>225</sup> The fact is, families settled in depopulated areas and began building houses and planting seeds before they heard back from the governors so, by the time they received their “political category” and made the actual land petition to the Local Agrarian Commission, they had already formed entire villages. They were then considered “invaders” by the original landowners who many times did not realize those groups had settled there until the relevant notice was published in the government gazette (*Diario Oficial de la Federación*).

Once owners realized their territories had been “invaded,” they went to the authorities and tried to vacate the squatters. If the state’s governor had already reached a resolution favorable to the settlers, owners began a process of judicial review called *amparo agrario* to overturn the decision. The Agrarian Code of 1934 made these interactions among owners, settlers, and authorities even more complicated because it

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<sup>222</sup> AGEV/CAM, Rancho Nuevo, Municipio of Minatitlán, and Barranca, Municipio of Cosoleacaque. Box 890, file 1791.

<sup>223</sup> AGEV/CAM, Agua Dulce, Municipio of Puerto México. Box 394, File 1384. Las Choapas, Municipio of Minatitlán file. Box 490, File 1864.

<sup>224</sup> AGEV/CAM, Jopoy, Municipio de Ozuluama, Pánuco. Box 268, File 775.

<sup>225</sup> “Código Agrario de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos,” in *Cinco siglos*, 571.

established that any community (population nucleus or not) was allowed to request lands as ejidos, as long as the petitioners were rural workers and did not engage in another activity that provided a salary.<sup>226</sup> This meant that families could now remain on an unoccupied area and make agrarian petitions immediately. This is precisely what began occurring in the peripheral areas of oil production in Veracruz.

Indeed, though many times deserted—except for the presence of some large landowners, like the Peláez family—until the onset of the petroleum industry, some territories where oil companies operated became a source of conflict during the 1930s.<sup>227</sup> The land invasions mentioned above occurred in areas where unionized oil workers, members of radical peasant leagues, oil-company managers, caciques, and local authorities operated as well. Such interactions turned violent at times. E. A. Ritter, manager of El Águila in Minatitlán, stated in a 1937 letter, “apart from the foregoing inconvenience and difficulties created I have to report that these invaders blame [one of] our employee[s] for the present state of affairs and have threatened him with direct action – one man actually drew a gun on him.”<sup>228</sup> In a plot called Tacoteno, a laborer declared that were he to be laid off or expelled from his home, that the two El Águila employees in charge would be “signing their death sentences.”<sup>229</sup> In El Jagüey, near Minatitlán, agraristas and oil workers who were struggling for lands that had been expropriated from

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<sup>226</sup> Additionally, no population nucleus of less than twenty people had the right to obtain land. *Idem*, 574.

<sup>227</sup> For more on general violence in Veracruz, see De la Peña, *Veracruz Económico*; Aguilar Sánchez and Ortiz Escamilla; Santoyo; Gillingham, “Force and Consent”; Verónica Oikón Solano and Marta Eugenia García Ugarte, *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX* (Morelia, Méx: Colegio de Michoacán/CIESAS, 2008). Gillingham, “Who Killed Crispín Aguilar?”

<sup>228</sup> Unsigned letter to T.N. Riddel, January 14, 1938. Pemex Archive, File 14364, f. 38.

<sup>229</sup> Letter from Rodríguez to J.W. Shelley. September 22, 1928. Pemex Archive, Box 3470, File 85808.

the Compañía Mexicana de Bienes Inmuebles, were protagonists of a gun fight that resulted in several wounded, including the president of the Comisariado Ejidal.<sup>230</sup>

Many petitioners were from rural extraction, so if they were laid-off by the companies during the oil crisis of the late 1920s or could not find a position on the oil fields presumably saw their “return to the land” as a natural choice. Petitioning for lands through the agrarian reform program, then, was an option they tended to consider, despite the limitations that the agrarian laws established regarding the eligibility of petitioners—basically, industrial workers were ineligible to receive agrarian grants. At the same time, workers’ camps near industrial enclaves (oil, textiles) grew into towns and cities, complicating the differentiations between rural ejidos and urban settlements. In the oil areas these already knotty systems of ownership became even more intricate with the presence of foreign capitalists, Mexican laborers, union organizers, communist and anarchist groups, and agraristas, all involved in or affected by the exploitation of petroleum.

Such was the situation in Veracruz when Cárdenas began his presidential period in 1934. In order to reach the goals of economic stability and industrialization outlined in the *Plan Sexenal*, Mexico required a steady industrial labor force and peace in the countryside. Cárdenas’s actions from the beginning of his term, as I show in the next section, reflected his intention to institutionalize the process of land redistribution and to regularize the industries with their corresponding unions. The corporatization of social

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<sup>230</sup> Letter from Pedro Marín, Inspector of Ejidos to the President of the Comisión Agraria Mixta, June 2, 1940. AGEM/CAM, El Jagüey, Antiguo Cantón de Minatitlán, Box 671, File 2895.

groups and the intervention of the state in the country's economic processes responded to this stabilizing need.

Veracruz was not the only state in the republic that was home to radical peasant and worker groups, but it was certainly one of the most affected by internal violence and social instability, especially during Cárdenas's presidential period.<sup>231</sup> Some areas of the state were also strategic for the economic growth of the country, not only because of the oil industry. Veracruz was in fact an important source of textiles, precious woods, agricultural products, and fish. Trade in the state's ports also provided considerable revenue and employment.<sup>232</sup> Peace and social stability in Veracruz were fundamental for the fulfillment of the postrevolutionary political and economic agenda. Cárdenas knew this very well, for he had spent long periods in the region. How could he stabilize those strategic zones for oil production without betraying the principles of the revolution that supported peasants' rights and workers' organization?

After the 1933 PNR convention and the release of the official party's *Six Year Plan*, Cárdenas consistently declared that he would give workers and peasants the power "to become jealous guardians of the continuity of the revolutionary accomplishments, demanding the fulfillment of the law and fighting against, if necessary, the bad politicians who do not follow those laws."<sup>233</sup> This type of rhetoric reveals the paradox of the revolutionary contract. While disarming peasants and allowing the repression of the peasant league in Veracruz, Cárdenas gave speeches that spoke about "*violentar* the more

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<sup>231</sup> Gillingham, "Who Killed Crispín Aguilar?"; Rodríguez, "The Beginnings of a Movement."

<sup>232</sup> For industrial production in Veracruz, see *Veracruz económico*; Gómez Galvarriato, *Industry and Revolution*.

<sup>233</sup> Falcón and García, *La semilla en el surco*, 116.



advanced aspects of the *Plan Sexenal*.<sup>234</sup> In 1934, a year after he had overseen the process of disarming the agraristas, Cárdenas declared, “I will give all peasants the *máuser* with which they made the Revolution so they can defend it, so they can defend the ejido and the school.”<sup>235</sup> This distribution of *máusers* obviously did not include Veracruz, as was left clear with the disarmament of the agrarian guerrillas in 1933.

Cárdenas was not foreign to arming agrarista groups. In Michoacán, he had founded the Confederation of Workers and Peasants and had supported agrarista guerrillas. However, despite its seemingly radical nature, the Confederation actually gave Cárdenas the ideal mechanism with which to institutionalize agrarismo. When he began his gubernatorial period in 1928, around ten thousand agraristas had been armed to battle the Cristero rebellion. The official rhetoric had exhorted these “armies” to think of their struggle as a way of defending their rights as revolutionary citizens, as well as their agrarian interests. Unless Cárdenas gained their sympathies, as Christopher Boyer has shown, these well-armed and ideologically driven agraristas might eventually pose as much of a threat as the Cristeros had at the height of their fight.

Cárdenas used the Confederation to regulate the behavior of agraristas by bringing these rural militants to the broader political project that Cárdenas had envisioned as governor of the state and then as president of the Republic.<sup>236</sup> By creating this organization Cárdenas had combined some of the more progressive strains of revolutionary thought, going from Zapata and Obregón for his agrarian agenda, to

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<sup>234</sup> Idem.

<sup>235</sup> Cárdenas, *Ideario político*, 114. See also, Cárdenas, *Epistolario de Lázaro Cárdenas, Vol. I*. Presentation by Elena Vásquez Gómez (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1974).

<sup>236</sup> Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*, 191.

political radicals like Adalberto Tejeda, Felipe Carrillo Puerto of Yucatan, and Tomás Garrido Canabal of Tabasco.<sup>237</sup> He, however, was able to integrate such ideas in an agrarian agenda that sought to centralize and regulate peasants' struggles. One way to do this was to in fact name the Michoacán Confederation an affiliate of the PNR, which ensured that it would not become a force of opposition for the central party.

In the end, the different approaches to how to deal with agrarista guerrillas were a mix of the political particularities of Michoacán versus those of Veracruz. Cárdenas had a much stronger grip over his own state than he ever did over Tejeda's, where the colonel had a loyal following among the more liberal political class and definitely among campesinos. Plus, Cárdenas had to rely on his own agraristas in the government's struggle against Cristeros, while Tejeda was able to frame peasants' fight in Veracruz as one of justice for the dispossessed against the attacks of large landowners and oil companies. The economic interests that operated in the two states also played a role, considering the strategic place that oil production occupied in the industrialization project envisioned by the PNR leadership in the early thirties. Cárdenas's dealings with peasant guerrillas in Michoacán and in Veracruz, then, show that the agrarian reform served to shape and in many ways control local forces, aligning them to the official party.

Although the peasant guerrillas and the Veracruz League had been debilitated after the disarmament, there were still groups that continued to fight the conservative agrarian practices imposed by the governors that succeeded Tejeda—five over a four-year period, a clear sign of political instability—and supported by the conservative Union of Cattle Ranchers and Farmers. As explained before, with the end of Tejeda's

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<sup>237</sup> *Idem*, 192.

presidential ambitions also came the beginning of a period of intense violence against peasants and agrarian petitioners. In theory, agrarian radicalism as such had ended with Tejada, but the violence in the countryside, including the oil fields, reached its highest point precisely after the colonel left his post. The centralizing push produced by the nationalization of the oil industry and the founding of Pemex would help neutralize these conflicts.

### **Agrarian Reform and Industrialization**

Pronouncing a speech at the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the oil nationalization, Lázaro Cárdenas established the direct relationship between the postrevolutionary agrarian reform program and the growth of the Mexican petroleum industry. It was 1963 and he was addressing a group of oil laborers. “The unanimous support of the Mexican people to the government of the Republic’s decision to face the rebelliousness of foreign companies...” he said, “contributed to end the violent struggles that were taking place in the countryside because of the agrarian reform.” He continued, “the oil expropriation and the Agrarian Reform represent acts of reaffirmation of our sovereignty and the protection of national interests...” Then, making clear that no other progress could be made until the problems in the countryside were completely solved, Cárdenas concluded, “...the enforcement of the Agrarian Reform by the State... establishes the industrialization of Mexico on solid and permanent bases of equilibrium.”<sup>238</sup> Cárdenas’s 1963 speech, then, suggests that the oil expropriation and the agrarian reform program were not two separate pillars of the postrevolutionary national

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<sup>238</sup> “Speech pronounced to workers of the oil industry celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the oil expropriation, March 21, 1963.” Cit. in Lázaro Cárdenas, *Ideario político*. Selection and presentation by Leonel Durán (México: Serie Popular Era, 1972) 51-2.

project, but that together they formed a solid backbone that supported the postrevolutionary ideals of political stability and economic sovereignty.

Although the peak of the land redistribution program and the oil expropriation occurred during the same period and were the consequence of the same political, legal, and cultural changes following the revolution, historians have traditionally studied them as two separate processes. Scholars of the oil industry have consistently explained the expropriation of 1938 as consequence of conflicts over labor rights between Mexican workers and foreign companies.<sup>239</sup> Such analyses include lengthy explanations of issues regarding property, but are usually limited to a diplomatic viewpoint, most specifically to the discussions over property rights between the postrevolutionary regime, the foreign oil companies, and their respective governments. In other words, the internal conflicts over landownership in the oil areas of Mexico—a “bottom-up” approach, one could say—have received little attention. In turn, specialists on the agrarian history of Mexico have seldom considered how the industrialization plans of the PNR, but most importantly of the PRM,

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<sup>239</sup> See Brown, “Acting for Themselves.” For comparative approaches: Brown and Lender, “Trabajadores en el petróleo extranjero.” The conflicts between foreign oil companies and the Mexican government before, during and after the Mexican revolution, have been subject of numerous works. Brown, *Oil*; Linda Hall, *Oil, Banks, and Politics: the United States and Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1917-1924* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Rippey, *Oil*. For diplomatic conflicts regarding the oil industry, see Meyer, *México y los Estados Unidos*; Idem and Morales, *Petróleo Y Nación*; Catherine Jayne, *Oil, War, and Anglo-American Relations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001); Guillermo Guajardo, “Aprendizajes de innovación y negocios en el petróleo y los ferrocarriles de México, 1952-1992,” in *Innovación y empresa: estudios históricos de México, España y América Latina*, ed. Guillermo Guajardo (México: Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008).

affected the countryside and proletarianized peasants by displacing entire communities and pushing families to regions destined for industrial production.<sup>240</sup>

Landownership and property rights played a fundamental role in the social, cultural, and economic life of postrevolutionary Mexico, so no analysis of modern Mexican history is complete without considering what Ilán Semo has called “the political culture of expropriation.” Semo has argued that with Cárdenas, property became “an ill-defined space subject to changes in relationships and power struggles, and that the management of property, and not property itself” became the center of the country’s economic rationality.<sup>241</sup> Such attitude reveals the paradoxical nature of the Mexican national project of the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time that the postrevolutionary regime was redistributing lands and boasting the need to make small peasants “independent producers” to develop Mexico’s economy, during the 1930s the federal government undertook an aggressive strategy to control all aspects of the country’s economic life in part through the administration of property, including the nationalization of strategic industries. To the consistent laissez-fair policies of the Porfiriato, the postrevolutionary government reacted by establishing state directives over most economic activities.<sup>242</sup>

The federal government enforced property laws written for the regularization of the two most important economic processes: agriculture and oil production. Article 27 of the 1917 constitution ensured the Mexican government’s control over the ownership of

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<sup>240</sup> Some exceptions that deal indirectly with this issue are, Rodney Anderson, *Outcasts in their Own Land: Mexican Industrial Workers, 1906-1911* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976); William French, *A Peaceful and Working People*.

<sup>241</sup> Ilán Semo, “El cardenismo revisado, la tercera vía y otras utopías inciertas,” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 55 (Apr.-Jun. 1993): 217.

<sup>242</sup> Durán, “Pemex: The Trajectory of a National Oil Policy,” 147.

land, natural, and subsoil resources, as well as over the land redistribution program. Fifteen years later, in 1933, the leaders of the PNR presented the *Six Year Plan* during their national convention. The *Plan* outlined the strategy for Lázaro Cárdenas's 1934-1940 presidential period and established the series of political, social, and economic reforms that defined the extent of power and right of intervention that the state, incarnated in the president, was going to hold. It highlighted the critical relevance of education, agrarian reform and of the organization of workers and peasants in a corporatist order.<sup>243</sup>

Most importantly, the Plan declared that Mexico was ruled by an “interventionist state... because the 1917 Constitution took away the purely political character of the State and pushed it toward the regulatory action of all vital phenomena of the Republic.”<sup>244</sup> As arbiter of the political, social, and economic life of the country, established the *Plan*, the federal government also regulated all issues regarding property rights. In other words, the *Plan Sexenal* restored the juridical and political capacity of the state to intervene in the social relationships of production. In the PNR leaders' own words, “the Mexican State must assume and maintain a politic of regulated intervention in the economic activities of national life... The State is the active agent for ruling and ordering the vital phenomena of the country, not a mere custodian of the national integrity, peace and public order.”<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> *Plan Sexenal*.

<sup>244</sup> Partido Nacional Revolucionario. *Plan Sexenal del Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (México: P.N.R., 1933), 4.

<sup>245</sup> *Memoria de la Segunda Convención Nacional Ordinaria del Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, (México: 1934), 69.

By the time the Plan was presented, president Abelardo Rodríguez had already enacted the new Agrarian Code as an addition to Article 27. The Code established the creation of the Agrarian Department to centralize the process of land distribution. This new regulation limited the power of state governors and concentrated the attributions for the enforcement of the agrarian reform in the federal executive, giving the president of the Republic the final deciding voice regarding land grants and restitutions.

Finally, Lázaro Cárdenas instituted the 1936 Expropriation Law, which established a causal relationship between the government's administration of the territory and the social well being of all Mexicans by treating the good of the nation in the same terms as the good of the people. The federal government, as a responsible father, overseer, and administrator, decided who was eligible for land grants and whose lands were subject to expropriation for the "common good."

Article 27, the *Plan Sexenal*, the 1934 Agrarian Code, and the 1936 Expropriation Law provided the juridical basis for the full involvement of the Executive in the economic processes that depended on the exploitation of land and natural resources. The Mexican state worked as "representative of the general interest," which is why by expropriating, said the defenders of these regulations, the federal government exercised a prerogative toward ensuring Mexico's sovereignty, and not an action to impose a legal right of the state over the citizens. Those who were against these laws, however, feared that the Executive was becoming too involved in individuals' rights to hold property.<sup>246</sup> Indeed, this set of regulations allowed the postrevolutionary regime through the double

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<sup>246</sup> *El Gobierno de México ante los problemas sociales y económicos. Mensaje del señor Presidente de la República. Opiniones del Partido Nacional Revolucionario acerca de la Ley de Expropiación.* (México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1936), 31.

personality of the state as a corporation (*persona moral*) and holder of private interests, to administer territory and control land possession.<sup>247</sup> It was during Lázaro Cárdenas's presidential period when these interventionist regulations began taking full form.

Cárdenas's presidency represents change in several different levels of politics.<sup>248</sup> His constant touring, both during his campaign and once he was elected, allowed the president to make himself present in big cities and small towns, in urban and rural settings. Cárdenas's use of radio helped this effort by letting his voice enter thousands of Mexican homes, and the *Plan Sexenal* assured a presidential period of six years, permitting the development of policies and reforms that would, in theory, "make of Mexico a responsible and strong country."<sup>249</sup> These novelties provided Cárdenas with tools to create a style of government centered in the Executive and characterized by specific ideological principles that needed to be disseminated throughout the country and integrated into the Mexican *mentalité*. Former president Abelardo Rodríguez had already said it, "the *Plan Sexenal* needs to penetrate into the nation's mind; it needs to be understood and encouraged by all levels of economic activity."<sup>250</sup>

Very specific notions of property and property rights also characterized Cárdenas's presidency. He based his political agenda, even from his time as governor of Michoacán, on ideas surrounding collective and not individual interests, which is why he proposed a social, institutional, and economic reform inspired in the Mexican socialism of the 1920s that governors Carrillo Puerto, Múgica, Tejeda, and Alvarado had already

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<sup>247</sup> *Idem*, 6.

<sup>248</sup> See Thomas Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 31-2.

<sup>249</sup> *Plan Sexenal*, 4.

<sup>250</sup> Rodríguez in *Plan Sexenal*, 3.



adopted to different degrees in their respective states.<sup>251</sup> Cárdenas's insistence on basing the agrarian reform on the ejido—a collective enterprise—and his focus on the organization of workers and on their confederations reflects this mentality. Cárdenas was, undeniably, consistently preoccupied with the elimination of selfish interests as part of the revolutionary goals. “In a period of human existence when evolution oscillates dangerously from an individualist selfishness and the noble concept of collective solidarity,” he declared at the end of his gubernatorial period in Michoacan in 1932, “it is not possible that the State, as an organization that serves the public good, remains inert and cold... when facing the social phenomenon that is developing within its boundaries.”<sup>252</sup> He considered, however, that neither the good intentions of the Executive, nor the relevant legislation were enough to bring progress to the people. In a speech during his 1934 presidential campaign he pronounced, “the formation of a collectivity is indispensable... for the postulates of social renovation to triumph.”<sup>253</sup>

Such governing philosophy, backed by the respective laws, justified the state interventionism that Cardenas espoused through the PNR and the PRM. During the 1930s, most of the country was going through intense demographic growth, putting

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<sup>251</sup> Semo, “El cardenismo,” 201. For more on the governing agendas of these politicians see the following works: Javier Moctezuma Barragán, *Francisco Múgica: Un romántico rebelde* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001); Martín Sánchez, *Grupos de poder y centralización política en México. El caso Michoacán, 1920-1924* (Mexico: INEHRM, 1994); Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*; Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised*; Francisco José Paoli Bolio, *Yucatán y los orígenes del nuevo estado mexicano: gobierno de Salvador Alvarado, 1915-1918* (México: Ediciones Era, 1984); Gilbert Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>252</sup> “Speech pronounced to the Congress of the state of Michoacan at the end of the constitutional period of government 1928-1932,” Morelia, September 15, 1932, in Cardenas, *Ideario politico*, 184.

<sup>253</sup> “Electoral speech as candidate of the PNR to the presidency of the Republic,” May 11, 1934, in *Ideario politico*, 185.

strain on the local economies, public services, natural resources, and land possession. Cárdenas observed this phenomenon and considered that his politics should address the new needs of the nation by extending the hands of the state over the process of land distribution and workers' rights. Peasants and laborers pushed for a program of land redistribution, but it was the Cardenista institutional and legislative reforms what ultimately allowed those peasants and workers to obtain lands and labor rights. The regime integrated those struggles into the myth and symbolism of the revolution, making them part of the official discourse, thus reducing their radical nature. From the violence and ideological radicalism of the revolution, the Callistas and later the Cardenistas made the necessary legal changes that allowed the institutions—governed by the Executive—and not the individuals or revolutionary factions, to control the restitution and distribution of land and the defense of laborers' struggles.

The 1930s agrarian reform, in many ways contributing to a de-radicalization of the revolutionary struggle, translated into the state's control over local politics and social movements. In theory, then, the state would have control over the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the country. However, in the state of Veracruz this control did not translate to reality on the ground. During the 1920s that region was the cradle and operational ground of some of the most radical mobilizations in postrevolutionary Mexico. Peasant leagues, communist and anarcho-syndicalist groups, and radical labor unions confronted major oil capitalists, large landowners, and their guardias blancas. Peasant groups received support in the form of land restitutions, weapons, and political power from Adalberto Tejeda during his two gubernatorial periods. Violent encounters between agraristas and guardias blancas over land possession and control of ejidos during

the 1920s occurred mainly in the center of the state, where the bulk of the population lived. Conflicts over property in the peripheral oil producing areas, some of which until the early 1930s had been depopulated, were in part ignited by the agrarista ideology that had spread to these peripheries. The following section explains this phenomenon.

### **Oil Expropriation and Agrarian Radicalism in Veracruz**

Lázaro Cárdenas never spoke about the reasons for the oil nationalization outside what he pronounced in his March 18, 1938 speech: “the social interest of the working classes in all industries and... the public interest of Mexicans.”<sup>254</sup> However, considering the increasing agrarista activity in Veracruz and southern Tamaulipas, most of it produced by disputes over territory, the control over oil lands was presumably also a goal. Previous disputes between the Mexican government and foreign oil companies had focused on the definition of rights in domestic and international law regarding foreign properties in Mexico. After the release of the 1917 Constitution, managers expressed their deep concern at the precepts of Article 27 and put pressure on the postrevolutionary governments to not apply the regulatory laws to the concessions already in place. Venustiano Carranza had already declared that the enforcement of Article 27 did not equate a confiscation, for subsoil resources “never ceased to be the property of the nation” since colonial times.<sup>255</sup> Carranza released a series of decrees in 1918 that declared that oil companies were now obligated to present and report their property titles or lease contracts to the Department of Industry, Commerce, and Labor. If the companies

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<sup>254</sup> *Discurso del Presidente Cárdenas con motivo de la Expropiación Petrolera* in Cárdenas, Lázaro Cárdenas, “10 de marzo,” in *Apuntes 1913/1940* (México: UNAM/Nueva Biblioteca Mexicana 1972), 393.

<sup>255</sup> Durán, “Pemex,” 159.

did not comply, the lands “would be considered vacant and open to ‘denunciation’ by third parties.”<sup>256</sup> The companies demanded a series of judicial reviews with the goal of countering those measures.

The juridical aspects property of holding changed in fundamental ways from the nineteenth century to the postrevolutionary period, most particularly in the issues of subsoil rights and the permanency of communal property. In terms of the control that the nation holds over that property, however, there is undoubtedly a sense of continuity. All nineteenth century constitutions, as well as that of 1917, refer to the state as the ultimate authority in the administration of land rights and the inalienability of private holdings (yet they do not refer to the state as “owner” of national property).<sup>257</sup> As stated in the Reforma laws, only the federal government had jurisdiction over disentailed lands. Property could be expropriated for public benefit, but that expropriation had to be preceded by compensation, a statute that remained in the post-revolutionary laws.<sup>258</sup>

There is, however, a particular juridical and rhetorical haziness in the 1917 constitution. On the one hand, the federal government had the authority to appropriate lands to form “population nuclei” and ejidos, while strategic resources could be expropriated for the “common good.” On the other, the 1917 Constitution respected the rights of proprietors, like in most other modern nations, by guaranteeing indemnifications for expropriated terrains, therefore limiting the role of the state in the administration of private property.<sup>259</sup> This does not constitute an ambiguity in and of itself, but Mexico’s

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<sup>256</sup> Durán, “Pemex,” 159.

<sup>257</sup> Mendieta y Nuñez, “El artículo 27.”

<sup>258</sup> Palavicini, *Historia de la Constitución*, 614.

<sup>259</sup> See Antonio Azuela, “La propiedad que no se discute. Jueces y expropiaciones en la ciudad de México,” in *Expropiar para la ciudad. La disputa por el interés público en*

Article 27 does not treat land holding as a natural right held by all. Instead, the constitution *grants* that right to its citizens. Mexican laws protect private property, but individual rights are never favored above those of society.

There is a tension between the need to satisfy social actors' demands for revolutionary justice and political participation, while maintaining the ultimate ownership of the land controlled by a strong Executive.<sup>260</sup> The 1917 constitution also reflects a conflict between federal and local powers, which in many cases limited the reach of the agrarian reform program after the revolution. Although the constitution tended to centralize the administration of the Mexican territory, state legislatures and governors still had a strong influence over what could or could not be done with the lands in their territories. For unoccupied lands, the governments of the second half of the nineteenth century put in practice federal laws to ensure the productivity of agricultural lands. In the case of communal properties, each state specified its own legislation.<sup>261</sup> The same control over the territory was passed on to the postrevolutionary governments. Landownership became a right granted by the nation through the constitution, but the local agrarian commissions, as well as the state governments, were the first to establish the eligibility of petitioners.

By establishing that there is no private property of strategic resources, is the Constitution declaring that everything that belongs to the nation can potentially belong to all Mexicans? If so, it would not be private property, but “national property.” If we follow the Constitution, the nation favors the common good over individual access to

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*cinco metrópolis latinoamericanas* (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales/Lincoln Institute of Land Policy/Instituto de Estudios Urbanos, 2012).

<sup>260</sup> Díaz y Díaz, “Las reformas,” 83.

<sup>261</sup> Kourí, “Interpreting,” 73.

land and, given that strategic resources are considered central for the development of the nation as a collectivity, they are “public domain.” However, if we study particular cases of land disputes that involve possible expropriations for the “common good,” we will find that the Supreme Court and local judges many times favored private property over the “nation’s ownership.” In many cases, especially during the 1920s, the Supreme Court judges based their decisions on the idea that private property is a “natural right,” which is a type of rhetoric that was no longer used in the 1917 Constitution.

This was the context in which foreign oil companies began fighting the Mexican government for their property rights. In 1921 the Mexican Supreme Court held that Article 27 was not to be enforced retroactively, and that it did not apply to “owners who had theretofore obtained oil on their properties or otherwise manifested their intention to exercise their petroleum rights in the subsoil.”<sup>262</sup> In 1923, during the Bucareli Conference, Álvaro Obregón assured the commission created by U.S. president Warren Harding that the 1917 Constitution would not be retroactive, and that the dominion of the state did not extend to oil properties acquired before 1917.

In 1925, Calles again tried to put limits to the power of foreign companies over Mexican subsoil resources with the Oil Law of 1925. The Law established that all petroleum companies were obligated to report and confirm the totality of their land concessions, which would only have a fifty-year duration. According to foreign oil capitalists, this went against the promises that Mexican officials had made in 1917 about the non-retroactivity of Article 27—the lands that oil companies had acquired before 1917 would remain in the companies’ power and were not subject to expropriation or

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<sup>262</sup> L.H. Woolsey, “The Expropriation of Oil Properties in Mexico.” *The American Journal of International Law* 32: 3 (1938): 519.

confiscation from the federal government. Managers, then, rose indignantly and declared that confirmatory concessions were equivalent to “outright confiscations.”<sup>263</sup>

By the early 1930s, the postrevolutionary government had exhausted all arguments to fight foreign oil companies on their property rights in Mexico. The boom and bust of the petroleum industry in the years immediately after the revolution had hired and fired thousands of workers. When the economy recovered and companies began rehiring, workers came back with a stronger desire to unionize. In 1935, refinery laborers from Tampico and Minatitlán brought together 21 local unions from 17 different foreign companies to form the STPRM, which soon joined the National Workers’ Confederation.

The STPRM presented the companies with an extensive collective contract that would have equalized pay and benefits across the industry. Most importantly, the National Union now demanded to be in charge of hiring and cessations, and that managers and supervisors belong to the STPRM.<sup>264</sup> In the meantime, the postrevolutionary leadership had been taking measures to gain some level of control over a labor movement that was not only overtaking the oil industry, but other enterprises as well. Article 123 of the 1917 guaranteed eight-hour shifts, minimum wages, and health benefits for male and female workers; it prohibited child labor and established that workers in the mining, oil, and agricultural sectors were to receive clean and decent housing. Article 123 also guaranteed workers’ right to go on strike and to take their grievances to the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board (Junta de Conciliación y

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<sup>263</sup> Virginia Prewett, *Reportage on Mexico* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1941), 124.

<sup>264</sup> Brown, *Oil*, 372-3.

Arbitraje, JFCA).<sup>265</sup> In short, the Constitution had given workers the opportunity to organize and gain considerable power, which postrevolutionary presidents sought to use in their favor, as well as to control in order to prevent workers' groups from becoming independent from the official Party.

Plutarco Elías Calles, removing labor conflicts in key sectors—mining, railroad, electricity, and textiles—from the jurisdiction of the states, placed them under the responsibility of the federal arbitration board in 1927. Calles then made the JFCA an entity of the Ministry of Industry, furthering the control that federal institutions held over conflicts between labor and capital. In 1931, the new Federal Labor Law voided local laws that gave some autonomy to the states regarding the way they dealt with union militancy and labor conflicts.<sup>266</sup> Finally, the *Plan Sexenal* gave the federal government the chief defender of workers' rights and the arbiter of labor conflicts. These measures allowed the Cardenistas to intervene legitimately in the conflict that arose between oil companies and workers in the mid 1930s and that ended with the 1938 expropriation.

Forming a unified front to confront oil companies on issues of wages, work shifts, housing, and safety in the fields, the STPRM leadership drafted a collective contract to present to all oil companies in 1936. Workers and managers negotiated for months, until

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<sup>265</sup> Article 123, in *Texto original de la Constitución de 1917 y de las reformas publicadas en el Diario Oficial de la Federación del 5 de febrero de 1917 al 1 de junio de 2009* (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas / Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010), 353-4.

<sup>266</sup> Santiago, *Ecology of Oil*, 311. Also, Ignacio Marván, "El PNR y el movimiento obrero: Mitos y realidades del 'desmoronamiento' y de la 'institucionalización'," in *75 años de sindicalismo mexicano*, coordinated by Alejandra Moreno Toscano and Samuel León González (México: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1986), 515-542; Lorenzo Meyer, Rafael Segovia, and Alejandra Lajous. *Historia de la revolución mexicana 1928-1934. Los inicios de la institucionalización* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1978).



the companies' consistent refusal to cave to the Union's demands, led to a series of strikes in 1937 that turned into a nine-day national stoppage in May and June. Calling it a "conflict of economic order" (*conflicto de orden económico*), the National Oil Workers' Union appealed to the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board. The Board accepted the appeal and appointed a commission of experts, who delivered a report mostly favorable to the STPRM in August. The companies once again appealed, but this time to the Supreme Court, whose judges ruled against them. On March 15, the companies still refused to obey the Board ruling and on March 18 Lázaro Cárdenas announced through the radio the expropriation of the oil industry by the federal government.

The general strike and the demands for a collective contract that the National Oil Workers' Union presented, gave Cárdenas a perfect excuse to frame the debate with the foreign oil companies on a different basis than his predecessors had done. In theory, the 1938 conflict was no longer about property, but about labor. Having continually renounced all actions that could be construed as endangering the companies' property rights, the Mexican government dealt with the 1937 strike and the 1938 expropriation as a domestic matter concerning employers and employees and not as an issue of property rights.<sup>267</sup> As Lorenzo Meyer has stated, "Cárdenas finally enforced Article 27... through Article 123."<sup>268</sup>

Article 27 guaranteed that the subsoil belonged to the Mexican nation and the 1938 Expropriation Decree returned both subsoil and surface to the power of the Mexican state. As such, Cárdenas and his successors acquired control over lands that had been under dispute for years. Foreign oil companies lost all power over their infrastructure and

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<sup>267</sup> Prewett, 115.

<sup>268</sup> Meyer, *México y Estados Unidos*, 136.

real estate. But Mexicans lost too. No more could recalcitrant oil workers and peasants reclaim the fulfillment of the “agrarian promises of the revolution” or use the rhetoric of nationalism to defend their right to overtake those lands. If before the expropriation they considered that their condition as Mexicans and as “sons of the revolution” gave them the right to remain in the area, after 1938 those arguments no longer worked. It is therefore not surprising that, during the oil dispute, the state’s control over the *territory* in the petroleum-producing areas was never mentioned. When Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated the oil industry, the general population saw him as the hero of the nation and his actions as a brave challenge to the foreign powers. Such perception could not be tainted with the technicalities of land possession, the Party’s corporatization project, and the limits of the agrarian reform in Veracruz.

### Conclusion

Cardenista policies of social regulation, state interventionism, and corporatization of the official party have been discussed at length.<sup>269</sup> Little has been said about the possibility that the oil expropriation was a tool for the political control of Veracruz and part of the efforts within the PNR and PRM to end the violent phase of the revolution and begin the institutionalization of the political system and the corporatization of social groups outside the Party.<sup>270</sup> This chapter underscored the relationship between land

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<sup>269</sup> Some examples are, Arturo Anguiano, *El Estado y la política obrera del cardenismo* (México: Era, 1984 [1975]); Tsvi Medin, *Ideología y praxis política de Lázaro Cárdenas*. (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1972); Córdova, *La política de masas*; Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*; Steven Sanderson, *Agrarian Populism and the Mexican State: the Struggle for Land in Sonora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth*; Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*; Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute*.

<sup>270</sup> Dwyer suggests a similar argument for agrarian expropriations. See Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute*.

control and the neutralization of radical groups that operated in Veracruz, especially during the 1930s. This relationship was put in the context of the growingly interventionist politics that formed the basis of the Mexican postrevolutionary political agenda and that culminated with the transformation of the PNR into the PRM in 1938. The relationship between the changing notions of national property and the control that the state began exercising over the property rights of individuals and collectivities during the 1930s was seen here as the key to understanding the Mexican postrevolutionary social contract.

During the 1920s and early 30s, Veracruz witnessed some of the most powerful social movements in the country, starting with the tenants' strike of 1922. Then, the formation of the Veracruz Peasant League, whose leader Úrsulo Galván rose to national notoriety for his direction of the National Peasant League, marked a moment when agraristas had the upper hand over large landowners and oil companies. These movements occurred mainly during the two gubernatorial periods of Adalberto Tejeda, a great supporter of the agrarian reform who formed peasant guerrillas to enforce it. When Tejeda fell from power—at the same moment when Cárdenas was elected president—a peak of violence put a major dent into the struggles of peasants and workers.

In his efforts to centralize peasant and workers' struggles Lázaro Cárdenas enforced a massive agrarian reform while disarming the agraristas in Veracruz. Such ambiguity was also reflected in the changes he spearheaded in the federal government's administration of property. In this chapter I have argued that the oil nationalization had the effect of furthering the centralization efforts of the federal government not only in the administration of lands and resources, but also in citizens' political participation. I have suggested approaches to the social implications of the nationalization and the way it

served to neutralize mobilizations in the oil fields that have not been considered before. The founding of Pemex would in theory expand this control even further. In practice, the national company still faced recalcitrant oil workers and discontent communities that lived in the oil fields.

#### **Chapter 4: Land Possession under Pemex: New Regime, Old Problems**

This chapter traces the relationship between the communities in or near the oil fields and the administration of the newly nationalized oil industry. It takes as its guiding theme the official discourse of “national patrimony” that surrounded the expropriation of March 1938. The chapter describes how the creation of Mexican Petroleum in June of the same year produced a centralization of the industry that continued with the earlier efforts by the official party to unify and standardize the governing and bureaucratic processes around land possession, workers’ rights, and the expropriation of strategic resources.

The chapter then explains how, after the first enthusiasm about the March 18 events dwindled, people in the oil communities began to understand that the foreign companies had been replaced by an equally forceful institution that tended to neutralize the complaints that arose locally against it through a rhetoric that put any discontent against the company as the work of traitors. These communities, however, also understood that an effective way to confront Pemex was to employ the same type of discourse that had surrounded its creation—that of national patrimony. Mainly, this chapter is about the entrance of Pemex in Veracruz and the types of conflicts that ensued. Better said, it is about the conflicts that remained unresolved—to the chagrin of oil

workers and the communities that lived near the oil fields—after the national company replaced the foreign ones.

The chapter is divided into three main parts. First, I provide a general discussion of the construction of the Mexican patrimonialist regime after the revolution. I argue that the redefinition of property rights and of the role that the state played in the administration of that property contributed to the general discourse about national belonging that circulated during the months after March 1938. Examining speeches, newspapers editorials, and other publications, in the second part I provide some examples of how the government used these tools to portray any action against the newly nationalized company as betrayal to the national project. Moreover, I focus on the veiled threats that such messages contained and relate them to how they translated on the ground, especially in the stern treatment that the federal government gave to the members of the National Oil Workers' Union after the creation of Pemex. The series of measures that the government undertook to diminish workers' participation in the administration of Pemex were supported by conflictive messages about the role that workers and the general population would play in the administration of the nation's patrimony.

In the last part of the chapter, I provide examples of conflicts involving Pemex functionaries with different communities that surrounded the oil fields. I show that the official message that declared the company and the oil industry patrimony of all Mexicans also had the effect of neutralizing the conflicts that began arising after 1938 in the oil communities, at the same time that it pushed petitioners to use a particular type of rhetoric when demanding access to land, housing, and education in the oil areas of Veracruz.

Throughout the history of Mexico, land and property holding have played a central role in social and economic relations. However, little has been written about the construction of a shared idea of national patrimony among Mexicans.<sup>271</sup> A number of scholars are beginning to unveil such phenomenon, particularly from anthropological and ethnohistoric approaches, but also from a historical viewpoint. Claudio Lomnitz's pioneer work on "communitarian ideologies"—shared ideas regarding political culture, moral economy, and regional and national identities that are built through specific notions of what constitutes a community's patrimony—is the most relevant example.

Lomnitz stretches anthropologist Annette Weiner's breakthrough theories on kinship and commodity exchange. Weiner focuses on those elements—family jewels, ritual clothing, land, even myths and oral histories—that form a group's inalienable possessions. These commodities are only subject to circulation when they are part a system of reciprocities, but they are not exchanged through formal economic systems. Lomnitz, inspired by Weiner's model of "keeping-while-giving"—in other words, allowing others the use of inalienable possessions that remain the patrimony of the original owner—studies the elements that form the national patrimony and that have contributed to processes of community building—including nation building—in Mexico.<sup>272</sup> Specifically, he has spearheaded the efforts in revealing how Mexican

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<sup>271</sup> One example that addresses national property from the perspective of Mexican political economy: José Juan González, "The Scope and Limitations of the Principle of National Property of Hydrocarbons in Mexico and Other Regions," in *Property and the Law in Energy and Natural Resources*, ed. Aileen McHarg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>272</sup> Anette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

patrimonialism has been constructed and how it affects the country's politics, economic relations, and national identity.<sup>273</sup>

Lomnitz's scholarship has inspired other research that provides new understandings of the ways in which people value their work and their role in the national landscape, depending on the commodities they produce.<sup>274</sup> This dissertation is one example. My analysis of the formation of communitarian ideology among oil workers and other neighbors of the oil zones adds to the study of the inalienable by unveiling how these individuals' proximity to oil production shaped their role in the national landscape. Most specifically, I enter in dialog with Lomnitz's and other works that focus on the specific rhetoric that accompanied the enactment of the 1917 constitution and most notably with the oil nationalization of 1938.<sup>275</sup>

### **The Patrimonialist Nature of the Mexican National Project**

The redefinition of property and property rights became the core of revolutionary nationalism in Mexico and the need to repair the dispossession that rural communities suffered during the nineteenth century the *raison d'être* of the postrevolutionary regime.

Plutarco Elías Calles, for example, was a firm believer in the right of the state "to impose

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<sup>273</sup> Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico : An Anthropology of Nationalism*, Public Worlds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>274</sup> Elizabeth Emma Ferry, *Not Ours Alone : Patrimony, Value, and Collectivity in Contemporary Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Lisa Breglia, *Monumental Ambivalence : The Politics of Heritage* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Elizabeth Emma Ferry and Mandana E. Limbert, *Timely Assets: The Politics of Resources and Their Temporalities* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2008); Eiss, *In the Name*.

<sup>275</sup> In particular, I rely on several works by legal sociologist Antonio Azuela. See, Azuela, "Durkheim y la tentación contractualista. Notas sobre la dimensión mítica del patrimonio nacional en México." In *¿Por qué leer a Durkheim hoy?* Edited by Juan Carlos Geneyro, Antonio Azuela and Juan Carlos Marín (México: Editorial Fontamara, 2009); Idem, "Los problemas que están detrás," in *En busca de Molina Enríquez: cien años de los grandes problemas nacionales*, edited by Emilio Kourí (México: El Colegio de México, 2009).

any changes to property regimes that responds to the public interest” and end with “the old system of land tenure in Mexico—thrift of lands, really.” A system that “ruined our country,” he declared in a speech.<sup>276</sup> In turn, in the poetic tone that always characterized his writing, Francisco Múgica considered that large properties were “only possible in a feudal system. The aristocracy can be found in the Old Testament and democracy in the New... The motherland has become a flower. The Revolution its spring.”<sup>277</sup>

Frank Tannenbaum wrote that constitutional article 27 created a variety of new legal forms of landholding, which provided the possibility of many different types and systems of land tenure. This formula, he argued, was developed to meet the needs of the diverse social groups that make up the Mexican community. “They needed a property concept that would be broad enough [and] sufficiently flexible to cover present needs and its flexibility makes it available for the creation of future specific types of land tenure,” he considered in his book, *Mexican Agrarian Revolution*.<sup>278</sup> Andrés Molina Enríquez placed the struggles surrounding property at Mexico at the center of the “great national problems.”<sup>279</sup>

The legislative measures undertaken to demarcate and administer property regimes after the armed struggle—essentially article 27—were the result of an also redefined notion of collective ownership of a national patrimony. The elements that constituted that patrimony—land and water, underground resources, historic landmarks, and archeological objects—became unifying tools when government officials portrayed

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<sup>276</sup> Plutarco Elías Calles. *Pensamiento político y social. Antología (1913-1936)*, Prologue and selection by Carlos Macías, (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), 232.

<sup>277</sup> Múgica, *Estos son mis apuntes*.

<sup>278</sup> Frank Tannenbaum, *Mexican Agrarian Revolution* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968 [1929]), 201.

<sup>279</sup> See, Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas*.



them as symbols of citizenship and national sovereignty.<sup>280</sup> In the inauguration ceremony of the National History Museum, Jaime Torres Bodet for example declared, “we are congregated today not as functionaries or journalists, civilians or military men, artist or historians, students or professors, but above all... As Mexicans... to review the bonds of a patrimony that concerns us all equally.”<sup>281</sup> In recounting the oil nationalization of 1938, journalist Elvira Vargas considered that the act signified a moment when “Mexico conquered itself” and became “owner of its own soil... for there are values that are more important than life itself: dignity, integrity. And for that men do all types of sacrifices.”<sup>282</sup>

The process of national identity formation in postrevolutionary Mexico, then, included the transformation of a set of physical spaces, objects, resources, and symbols into a cornucopia of inalienable goods that arose sentiments of patriotism and for which the population acquired a sense of territorial and national belonging.<sup>283</sup> Protecting them became an act of patriotism. In his presidential campaign, for example, Calles declared that property changes were a patriotic act, for “if peasants remain in a state of misery and slavery, our motherland will have to continue suffering internal commotions, endless miseries, and humiliations from more powerful nations.”<sup>284</sup> In the various archeological discoveries that took place in the 1930s, patriotism played a fundamental part, as recent

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<sup>280</sup> For the cultural construction of citizenship in postrevolutionary Mexico, I draw from Lomnitz’s, *Deep Mexico*; a different perspective on the use of culture as a category of analysis for national identity formation can be found in Knight, “Popular Culture...”

<sup>281</sup> Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 81.

<sup>282</sup> Elvira Vargas, “Defensa de la nacionalidad,” in *El Nacional*. March 18, 1939.

<sup>283</sup> Azuela, “Durkheim”; Idem, “El problema”; Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico*; Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*.

<sup>284</sup> Calles, 114.

works have shown.<sup>285</sup> Paul Gillingham writes about a “sycophantic state congress” in Guerrero that supported the state governor’s “more than usual patriotism” by approving an investigation to discover the truth behind the unmarked tomb where the bones of Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc supposedly lay.<sup>286</sup> The patriotic discourse that surrounded the nationalization of the oil industry is perhaps the strongest example of this “patrimonial nationalism.” “The workers who managed to keep the oil industry going after the expropriation,” said Pemex’s director in the 1950s, Antonio Bermúdez, “were stimulated by their patriotism, their love to the oil industry, and the inspiring leadership of President Cárdenas...”<sup>287</sup>

Miguel Tinker-Salas has shown that, for the Venezuelan case, the notions of citizenship that residents of the oil camps developed “rested on a vision of the nation framed not only by systems of inclusion but also of exclusion, since these forces coexisted side by side and were regularly being redefined and renegotiated.” These notions were very much related to how oil companies modified the particularities of Venezuela’s social, political, racial, and economic reality, promoting “social practices, customs, values, and normative expectations” that had not been a part of that country’s national project fostered by the state.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> An example is Sandra Rozental’s “Mobilizing the Monolith: Patrimonio and the Production of Mexico through its Fragments,” Ph.D. Diss. New York University, 2012.

<sup>286</sup> Paul Gillingham, *Cuauhtémoc’s Bones: Forging National Identity in Modern Mexico*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 58.

<sup>287</sup> Antonio J. Bermúdez, *La política petrolera mexicana* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1976), 38.

<sup>288</sup> Tinker-Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 9. See also, Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

A similar system of inclusion/exclusion existed in Mexico—but one that was advanced by the postrevolutionary government and not the private companies. In the national arena, the corporatization scheme that pushed men and women to subscribe to a particular organization, institution, or confederation in many ways shaped the political lives of Mexicans. This inclusive corporatism that the revolutionary Party—which put the need to form a central, strong state above the need to form individual citizens—added to the feeling that entire communities either faithfully ascribed to the national project or were entirely against it. Though in practice this differentiation acquired endless forms depending on the political interest and social configuration of different regions, the message that accompanied the formation of the postrevolutionary regime was one of absolute inclusion or definitive exclusion. Property rights were but one aspect of the revolutionary legal changes that defined people’s experience in this game of belonging.

Indeed, as legal sociologist Antonio Azuela has established, the relationship between patrimonialism and nationalism comes from the idea that there is a “cornucopia” that is citizens’ property and that everyone is obligated to protect.<sup>289</sup> In Mexico, this cornucopia and the way it should be protected are defined in constitutional article 27. Moreover, protecting that patrimony contributes to define postrevolutionary citizenship, for it circumscribes the conditions by which people belong—or not—to the national project.<sup>290</sup> The patrimony Azuela refers to, then, provides “palpable references and a

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<sup>289</sup> Azuela, “Durkheim,” 13.

<sup>290</sup> For more on the postrevolutionary citizen see Lomnitz, “Modes of Mexican Citizenship,” in *Deep Mexico*, 58-80.

clear sense” of the national community to which, ideally, all citizens should strive to belong.<sup>291</sup>

The redefinition of property rights in postrevolutionary Mexico was fundamental in the construction of postrevolutionary collective citizenship. It was also crucial in the development Veracruz’s own communitarian ideology, as it related to the proximity of the local population to the oil industry and the patrimonialist rhetoric that accompanied oil production. Moreover, the quotidian interactions between the people who settled in or near the oil fields and the oil companies, local authorities, and neighboring communities shows the relationship that different groups in the state of Veracruz developed with the federal government through their social and political experiences regarding national patrimony.

### **Illusion and Disappointment: The Rhetoric of National Patrimony**

Lázaro Cárdenas declared the oil expropriation on March 18, 1938. It was a Friday. On the same day, Vicente Lombardo Toledano offered the closing remarks for the conference “Petroleum Week” (“Semana del Petróleo”), which took place from the 14 to the 18 of March at the National Palace of Fine Arts.<sup>292</sup> The objective of that conference, organized by the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública), was to discuss the oil issue with students in secondary school. This matter, according to Enrique Beltrán, director of the Department of Secondary Education, “is not something of interest only to workers of the oil industry, or of little importance to this or that social sector in

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<sup>291</sup> Azuela, “Durkheim,” 12.

<sup>292</sup> Vicente Lombardo Toledano, “Significación del triunfo obrero Pemex el papel de la juventud mexicana ante el problema,” in *Sobre el petróleo de México. Conferencias* (México, Departamento de Prensa Pemex Publicidad, 1938) 94-109.

our country. It affects our whole life and, in consequence, reaches the entire nation.”<sup>293</sup>

Before the president had actually announced the expropriation of the oil industry, hundreds of students were already learning to look at the struggle with the petroleum companies as an issue that affected them, not as individuals, but as a community of Mexicans.

Once Cárdenas had declared the nationalization on the radio, First Lady Amalia Solórzano made a plea to the Mexican people to donate what they could to the oil cause. Thousands showed up at the National Palace of Fine Arts to give what they could: pearls, wedding bands, sacks of corn, chickens, the small contents of a child’s piggy bank. At the same time that the oil controversy produced heated discussions in the high levels of politics, children were being indoctrinated about the importance of the national ownership of subsoil resources, peasants and small workers were called upon to save the country from its debts, and most social groups in Mexico coincided that this had been a heroic feat; even the Catholic church—for so long the top internal enemy of the revolutionary regime—supported the nationalization. The words of writer and historian José Fuentes Mares convey the nationalist spirit of those days, “every Mexican who was alive in 1938 will remember that Mexico became morally united with the oil expropriation... The tumultuous rallies supporting the regime, the emotive popular contributions to the payment of the debt... All this proved that the arrogant gesture of the president had touched something inside our chests.”<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Enrique Beltrán, “Palabras del Ciudadano Profesor Enrique Beltrán, Jefe del Departamento de Enseñanza Secundaria,” in *Ibid*, 17. My translation.

<sup>294</sup> José Fuentes Mares, *La Revolución Mexicana. Memorias de un espectador*, (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1972), 229. My translation.

The nationalization of the oil industry not only demonstrated that Mexico was taking its struggles to face foreign powers and achieve economic sovereignty very seriously, but also that regular people were actors in the national stage. Moreover, the participation of the laboring class in this conflict gave the nationalization of the oil industry a true democratic air. “People were happy,” one oil worker remembered, “there was much alcohol, songs... People developed a patriotic feeling and sang ‘Great Britain, with all her cannons, no longer scares us’.”<sup>295</sup> Other patriotic tunes about the expropriation were sung in oil fields and schools, as well as played on the radio and recorded by major labels. During the celebrations to commemorate the expropriation one year later, five thousand school children performed the Oil Corrido: “Far gone are now/ The powerful men who/ Came to exploit/ our beautiful land. They left the fields/ The tanks and the wells/ The rich black oil/ That is our national product.”<sup>296</sup> Socorro Castañón de Zárate, from the oil town of Naranjos, Veracruz, memorized oil songs in her childhood home, while her husband Ramón Zárate González remembered them from his time as a young worker in Tampico, Tamaulipas.<sup>297</sup> Socorro Castañón also recalled a tune about the need to stop the exploitation of workers and that, in order to obtain “proletarian justice,” workers had to “destroy the chains of traditional slavery.”<sup>298</sup> The lyrics also said that saviors were not needed: “capital must continue on its own, and that is how workers

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<sup>295</sup> Lief Adleson interview with Ramón Zárate González. Tampico, Tamaulipas, PHO/4/22.

<sup>296</sup> “Celebración de la expropiación petrolera,” *El Nacional*. March 16, 1939.

<sup>297</sup> Lief Adleson interview with Ramón Zárate González. Tampico, Tamaulipas, PHO/4/22.

<sup>298</sup> Lief Adleson interview with Socorro Castañón de Zárate. Tampico, Tamaulipas. PHO/4/23, 12-3.

will impose their will.”<sup>299</sup> In Ciudad Juárez, during an official visit by Lázaro Cárdenas, a choir sang “a Revolutionary March [sic], the National Anthem,” and, to the official entourage’s great surprise, “the Oil Corrido!”<sup>300</sup>

During the year following the expropriation, thousands of speeches were pronounced; newspapers published editorials, pieces of general interest, and myriad recounts of the days leading to the nationalization.<sup>301</sup> Cárdenas received hundreds of congratulatory letters, while people rallied and marched in support of the government in the main cities of Mexico. The fact that in many cases these were, as Alan Knight has observed, carefully organized events, says much about the type of massive mobilization that the Cardenistas were able to ignite, at the same time that “communications to the president do suggest that awareness of this national issue had penetrated to self-confessed remote corners of outlying states.”<sup>302</sup>

Countless symbols and images were evoked during the months after the nationalization.<sup>303</sup> But the basic message that circulated was that oil was the patrimony of the nation and that, by expropriating it, the Cardenista administration had accomplished an act of national justice. “The act that we celebrate today... has the historic and economic transcendence of affirming Mexico’s economic and political stability,” said *Excelsior*, “since the expropriatory decree signifies the elimination of the old system... that prevented Mexicans from exercising power over their forests, waters, and the riches

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<sup>299</sup> Idem.

<sup>300</sup> Pedro J. Almada, *99 días de jira con el Presidente Cárdenas* (México: Ediciones Botas, 1943) 81.

<sup>301</sup> Enrique Calderón, “Lo que vi el 18 de marzo en el Palacio Nacional,” *El Nacional* April 2, 1939. See also, Narciso Bassols Batalla, *Las etapas de la nacionalización petrolera* (México: Cámara de Diputados, LIX Legislatura/M.A. Porrúa, 2006).

<sup>302</sup> Knight, “The Politics of the Expropriation,” in Brown and Knight, 113.

<sup>303</sup> For a lengthy analysis of those messages see Idem 106-111.

of the subsoil.”<sup>304</sup> The Chief of the Labor Department considered in a radio address, “There is no one single Mexican, there cannot be a Mexican who does not agree that... the riches of our soil must stay in Mexico to improve our economy.”<sup>305</sup> “The people could contain neither their anger, nor that which they have always desired: to be the owners of their own soil,” declared journalist Elvira Vargas in an editorial piece.<sup>306</sup> “The natural riches of the country must be exploited by the people and only for their benefit,” read a sign in the rally to celebrate the expropriation’s first anniversary.<sup>307</sup> “Is it not within our national conscience that the oil riches had to come back to the hands of the state for the benefit of the whole Nation?”<sup>308</sup> asked an *Excélsior* reporter.

The consistent rhetoric of unity, patriotism, and sacrifice that was published in newspapers and transmitted through the radio, put all social groups within the ranks of the PRM—which had been created 12 days after the expropriation—under a supposed path toward class harmony. All Mexicans, regardless of their “sector,” region of origin, occupation, or socioeconomic background were now obligated to fight for the country’s common good and patriotism under one leader—the President of the Republic. “Hundreds of thousands of workers from the fields to the workshop, from official spheres, and all social classes demonstrated that they not only support the Government originated from the Revolution, but that they are willing to offer their lives, if it were necessary, to achieve the rise of our *Patria*” considered a reporter from *El Nacional* when

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<sup>304</sup> “Está justificada la trascendencia de tal actuación,” *Excélsior*. March 20, 1939.

<sup>305</sup> “Analizó la situación,” *El Nacional*. March 19, 1939.

<sup>306</sup> Elvira Vargas, “Defensa de la nacionalidad,” in *El Nacional*. March 18, 1939.

<sup>307</sup> “Hubo cien mil asistentes en el mítin de ayer,” *Excélsior*. March 20, 1939.

<sup>308</sup> “Está justificada la trascendencia de tal actuación,” *Excélsior*. March 20, 1939.



covering a rally in Chiapas in support of the expropriation.<sup>309</sup> “No matter the sacrifice which we have to assume,” declared *El Nacional*, “our people are temperate, the Government is honest, and, in payment for the redemption of the national patrimony, they will know how to withstand the privations which economic reprisal may produce.”<sup>310</sup>

Fidel Velázquez, then Secretary of Information and Propaganda for the CTM, made a call to “CROM, CNC, CGT, Mine Workers’ Union, Electricians, National League of Cooperative Societies, the popular Sectors, the Army, and all the people from the Federal District” to attend the rally to show Cárdenas their support.<sup>311</sup> Mexico’s unity was to be reflected through all groups, according to Elvira Vargas: “Mexico was the oil and mine workers, railroad laborers, and peasants, all the workers, all social sectors. Mexico was growing up to be a man and was reclaiming what was his.”<sup>312</sup> Moreover, citizens not only had the responsibility to support the regime’s decision to nationalize, but they also had the obligation to protect the patrimony of the nation under the watchful eye of the government.

The feeling at that moment was that the nationalization was, if nothing else, a just restitution of what had all along been the patrimony of the nation. “The reincorporation of subsoil rights to the dominion of the Nation contributes to the integration of the territorial patrimony that all Mexicans are obligated to look after,” published *Excelsior*, “especially young Mexicans who received in their custody this national patrimony for which so many internal struggles and insatiable appetites have weighed over the

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<sup>309</sup> “El pueblo chiapaneco ratificó su adhesión al general Cárdenas,” *El Nacional*. April 19, 1939, p. 8.

<sup>310</sup> *El Nacional*, March 19, 1938, in Knight, “The Politics,” 110.

<sup>311</sup> “Lo organiza el PRM como una conmemoración,” *El Nacional*. March 12, 1939.

<sup>312</sup> Elvira Vargas, “Defensa de la nacionalidad,” in *El Nacional*. March 18, 1939.

Republic.”<sup>313</sup> As such, the revolutionary leadership and the press were unequivocal when declaring that questioning the expropriation was an act of treason. “Anti-patriotic and defectors (*tránsfugas opositores*) of the Revolution” *Novedades* called them, and declared, “The expropriation will not be discussed and it is a *fait accompli* over which the government will not go back.”<sup>314</sup> Cárdenas advised “the enemies of the regime” to analyze their attitude of “indiscipline and prevarication toward the duties that the Patria asks of them.”<sup>315</sup>

An authoritative air surrounded the expropriation itself. A famous anecdote places Cárdenas and Francisco Múgica walking by the Cuernavaca highway on their way back from visiting the sugar mill “Emiliano Zapata” in Zacatepec; the gray Packard idling nearby, the sun setting over the corn cobs, and the two men discussing the possibility of the expropriation. According to Cárdenas, he asked Múgica right then to “outline a manifest to the Nation, explaining the act that the Government is undertaking and asking for the support of the people in general, because this is a resolution that dignifies Mexico...”<sup>316</sup>

Then, in his account of the events occurred at the National Palace on March 18, Enrique Calderón, one of the writers of the expropriation decree, remembered that he and other many collaborators were called for a meeting at 8 p.m. President Cárdenas asked these men’s opinions regarding the possibility of nationalizing the oil industry. “Two or three minutes of embarrassing silence went by” after the president had finished

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<sup>313</sup> “Está justificada la trascendencia de tal actuación,” *Excélsior*. March 20, 1939, p. 10.

<sup>314</sup> “Bases para el arreglo petrolero,” *Novedades*. March 19, 1939.

<sup>315</sup> “Trascendentales conceptos presidenciales en la jornada de ayer,” Departamento de Prensa Pemex Publicidad. Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Colección Hemerográfica Contemporánea.

<sup>316</sup> Lázaro Cárdenas, “10 de marzo,” in *Apuntes*, 389.

explaining the conflict between the companies and workers, remembered Calderón. After several attendees uttered some words of solemn approval, Cárdenas said that, considering the responses of those few who had talked, he assumed that there was unanimous approval of the project he had put to their consideration. He then “communicated to us that he had ordered that an announcement was made for 10 p.m. for a radio transmission of the Manifest that he would direct to the Nation, which he himself would read in front of the microphone.”<sup>317</sup> The decision had been made, it seems, before Cárdenas walked into the meeting.

Whatever the reason for such strategy, Cárdenas has been painted as the sole author of the nationalization and its main ideologist. “In the history of the Mexican oil industry,” wrote Antonio Bermúdez in 1976, “President Cárdenas is the stellar figure... Everything that has been done and gets done in the petroleum industry in Mexico is possible and finds its foundation in his courageous and visionary decision to expropriate it.”<sup>318</sup> In general, it is fair to say that the nationalization produced hopeful reactions and put Cárdenas in the pantheon of Mexico’s national heroes. However, the mass mobilizations, the patriotic speeches, and the self-congratulatory rhetoric that circulated in the press, did not reflect the mood of confrontation that originated between the federal government and the Oil Workers’ Union, especially after the creation of Pemex in June of 1938.

Workers demanded to participate in the administration of the oil industry right after expropriation, but those demands were not new. Neither was the idea to nationalize.

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<sup>317</sup> Enrique Calderón, “Lo que vi el 18 de marzo en el Palacio Nacional,” *El Nacional*. April 2, 1939.

<sup>318</sup> Bermúdez, *La política*, 40.

In fact, in a conflict between workers in the Poza Rica region and El Águila in 1937 the union had already voiced the desire to manage any entity that the government decided to create were the industry to be nationalized. The model would be the workers' administration that had been formed with the nationalization of the railroads the same year.

Section 30 of STPRM (Poza Rica) had been pushing for the implementation of a collective contract for the entire industry since 1936, but the aim was always to standardize salaries and working conditions, not to modify the existing structural organization of the industry. The conflict between Poza Rica workers and El Águila developed into an issue of political importance nationally when the foreign oil companies refused to implement a number of terms for a new contract. It was then that union members began talking about the possibility of expropriation and the transferring of oil properties to the workers as a possible solution to the problem.<sup>319</sup> At the time Cárdenas met with the secretaries of all STPRM's locals to discuss the future of the industry should the government be forced to expropriate in case the conflict with El Águila could not be solved satisfactorily. Each local was asked to put together a plan stating how production would be handled at each branch. Cárdenas's idea was to provide the STPRM with some administrative power at the local level but, in the event of expropriation, the government would control the industry nationally. That way union branches would ensure workers' cooperation to maintain production at each locality, at the same time that the government would not surrender the general administration of the nationalized industry.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> For more on this conflict see, Ruth Adler, "Worker Participation in the Administration of the Petroleum Industry, 1938-1940," in Brown and Knight, 131.

<sup>320</sup> *Idem*, 133.

The conflict between Poza Rica local 30 and El Águila continued throughout 1937 and included a strike of 57 days that finally pushed the British to accept the workers' main demands—the creation of 250 new permanent posts and equal salary scales to that of Tampico's section 1. The problems did not end there. Several sections of the STPRM began pushing for equal pay, which produced stoppages during late 1937 and early 1938. Eventually, these tensions led to the “conflict of economic order” over which the nationalization was finally based. The 57-day strike, however, had already established precedent to the role that workers' strove to play in the national industry.

Cárdenas declared the expropriation of the oil industry on March 18, 1938. On March 19, the National Executive Committee of the STPRM sent emergency instructions to all STPRM's sections stating that local administrative councils were to be designated in each region. Each council was to ensure that production continued without serious interruption. On March 20 an Executive Oil Council (Consejo Directivo del Petróleo) was established to coordinate the administration of production at the national level. In turn, the local councils had significant freedom of action in local matters: they named the heads of each department and resolved problems related to staff and working conditions.<sup>321</sup>

In June of 1938 Cárdenas founded Mexican Petroleum and the Mexican Petroleum Distributor (Distribuidora de Petróleos Mexicanos) and ordered that the local councils be disbanded and that the company begin administering the industry permanently.<sup>322</sup> The STPRM fought to maintain its administrative position when the federal government began discussions regarding the role that the laborers would play in

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<sup>321</sup> *Idem*, 134-5.

<sup>322</sup> *Idem*.

this new scenario. Two main options were brought to the table. The first was to create a workers' cooperative—an idea that had already been discussed during the 57-day strike in 1937. This meant that the national company would remain private and workers become shareholders. This option also implied that both the property and the administration of the oil industry would have been transferred to the union.<sup>323</sup> The second alternative was for the union to continue the full administration of the nationalized industry, with the oil infrastructure and properties in the hands of the state and the workers in managerial roles. Most laborers supported the latter option, for they considered that a cooperative would not only betray the ideological interests of the working class (shareholding would immediately turn them into members of the bourgeoisie, they argued), but also that it would turn them into federal employees. Because at the time there was no “legislation in force that protected the rights to strike and of free association of government employees” this was certainly an undesirable choice.<sup>324</sup>

The final solution was not what workers had hoped for. Under the legislation that created Pemex and the Distribuidora, the STPRM had only a small degree of control in the management of the industry because the union was still in a minority in the administrative councils of the two entities. Moreover, the union was under significant pressure from the government to accept a reorganization of the industry that would reduce the costs of production.<sup>325</sup> At the same time, the loss of international markets that came after the expropriation—mainly due to the boycott that foreign companies and

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<sup>323</sup> *Idem*, 138.

<sup>324</sup> *Idem*, 132.

<sup>325</sup> Fabio Barbosa Cano, “El movimiento petrolero en 1938-1940,” in *Los sindicatos nacionales, Los sindicatos nacionales. Petroleros*, coord. Javier Aguilar (México: GV Editores, 1986), 62.

governments enforced against Mexico—had critical consequences for the newly nationalized industry.

As historian Fabio Barbosa Cano has shown, by 1937 the production of crude oil had risen to nearly to 47 million barrels and the exports consisted of almost 25 million barrels—53.2 of total production. The boycott that the British companies orchestrated after the expropriation closed approximately 90 percent of the international sales outlets. Oil production suffered enormously under this pressure and numerous fields had to be closed down. From the approximately 45 fields that existed in 1937, 15 disappeared entirely in the years following 1938. Between early 1937 and late 1938, the number of oil wells in operation declined from 1,039 to 756. By the beginning of 1940 there were 807 oil wells in full production.<sup>326</sup> A commission of experts assigned to assess the severity of the situation concluded that problems would only be aggravated by a government decision to give the administration to the workers. The commission concluded that the immediate interests of the industry would be best served by a continuation of the existing mixed government-union administration.

In the meantime, the conservative turn undertaken by Cárdenas during the two years after the expropriation was in many ways the reflection of this confrontation. A consistent message that admonished organized labor to “discipline its ranks, elevate its productive capacity, its technical efficiency, and the responsibility of its guides” contained a veiled threat.<sup>327</sup> Anyone who was not with the revolutionary government was really against it. Moreover, Cárdenas’s regime had consistently backed up the struggles

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<sup>326</sup> Barbosa Cano, “Technical and Economic Problems of the Newly Nationalized Industry,” in Brown and Knight, 191.

<sup>327</sup> “Está justificada la trascendencia de tal actuación,” *Excelsior*. March 20, 1939.

of the oil workers—the working class in general—so now it was time to show some support in return. “Not in vain,” said Cárdenas in 1939, “has the revolution advanced all their rights [workers’] and has put under their charge the administration of public services...”<sup>328</sup> There was no question, at least as the press expressed it, that Cárdenas was “the highest social leader in Mexico” and that “the industrial proletariat—as well as the peasants, youths, and revolutionary intellectuals—will listen to his instructions and will fulfill his orders, and this will lead to the advancement of the Patria.”<sup>329</sup> The press consistently portrayed STPRM’s dissenting members as “saboteurs” and “agents of the companies.” Cárdenas himself sent a telegram to union leaders admonishing them to take “urgent measures that prevent activities... that constitute acts of sabotage.”<sup>330</sup> These veiled threats, however, did nothing to stop the discontent that oil workers, among other laboring groups, began to experience after 1938.

The illusions that the nationalization and the creation of Pemex had produced began dwindling only a few months after. The initial difficulties that the new national company encountered in forging a strong administration, added to the technical issues produced by the lack of specialized personnel and spare parts that could only be purchased from companies that were not selling to Mexico, plus the embargo that the British government had put on Mexican oil, meant that Pemex could not afford any missteps. Keeping the National Oil Workers’ Union in check became a necessity, then.

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<sup>328</sup> “Responsabilidad de los trabajadores,” *Novedades*. March 19, 1939.

<sup>329</sup> *Idem*

<sup>330</sup> Barbosa Cano, “El movimiento,” 63.



All in all, the president blamed the union for the industry's internal crisis, explained almost exclusively by the increase in the numbers of workers employed.<sup>331</sup> Through a fourteen-point memorandum read by Cárdenas in the Ambassadors Salon at the National Palace to the leaders of the 32 STPRM sections, Cárdenas proposed a drastic reduction of full-time personnel and of temporary workers. He then extended the power of managers and superintendents, contributing to the overall centralization of the industry.<sup>332</sup> STPRM leaders soon voiced their indignation because workers generally believed that the industry's high-level employees had caused the crisis. Laborers also resented the fact that Pemex directors lived in "luxury and ostentation," "wasting money on automobiles and refrigerators" while the salaries of lower-level employees were being reduced from what they had been in 1937.<sup>333</sup>

Faced with union opposition, Cárdenas and the CTM took drastic measures: the army broke up a labor stoppage in the Azcapotzalco refinery and CTM agents took the STPRM headquarters by force; the newspapers consistently vituperated the workers; the Minister of Communications (SCOP) declared that those who opposed the government in the measures to reform the industry "must be considered not only bad revolutionaries, but also bad Mexicans and even more: as TRAITORS OF THE PATRIA [sic]"; in his fourteen-points, the president accused the workers of "forgetting their patriotism" and

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<sup>331</sup> Alberto Olvera, "The Rise and Fall of Union Democracy at Poza Rica," in Brown and Knight, 82.

<sup>332</sup> Idem.

<sup>333</sup> Olvera, 83 and Rippy, *Oil*, 263.

reminded them that they were “better positioned economically than many other organized workers.”<sup>334</sup>

Ultimately, the workers had been fighting to protect their salaries and retain their influence within the company, but the government gave priority to stable labor relations, the raising of production, and operational control.<sup>335</sup> Such policy continued throughout the 1940s, with the company refusing to “augment expenses in salaries and benefits, for all the resources of this enterprise must be destined to the growth and development of the oil industry.” Efraín Buenrostro, the first director of Pemex after the nationalization, made these declarations, at the same time that he signaled that oil workers needed to “realize completely that Mexican Petroleum has under its responsibility an industrial activity that belongs to the Nation and in which [the workers] have invested their future and that of their families.” Whether the industry grows or suffers any sort of crisis, Buenrostro continued, “the interests of the workers will be the ones affected.” Moreover, it was the responsibility of union leaders to “become interested in that the economy of this industry does not suffer any setback and, on the contrary, that it grows every day.”<sup>336</sup>

Workers in the isolated oil fields and the communities that came face to face with the new national industry, however, were unaware or did not consider such factors. They saw and felt that Pemex management was enforcing the same way of life and work methods as the foreign bosses. They also understood that their influence over the company’s actions was declining.<sup>337</sup> Laborers had very specific ideas about their

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<sup>334</sup> Idem. Also, José Rivera Castro, “Periodización del sindicalismo petrolero,” 28 and Barbosa Cano, “El movimiento,” 78.

<sup>335</sup> Olvera, “The Rise and Fall,” 84.

<sup>336</sup> Efraín Buenrostro to Manuel Ávila Camacho. n/d. AGN/MAC, 606.3/61.

<sup>337</sup> Olvera, “The Rise and Fall,” 84.

participation in the administration of the newly formed company, as well as about their rights as an industrial class in the oil camps and towns. There was great disappointment among people living in the oil communities when those ideas did not translate to reality. Such disappointment was also related to how Pemex administered the territory and resources over which it took control after 1938.

### **Conflicts on the Ground**

The conflicts between Pemex and workers in specific oil communities had as much to do with the macropolitical factors explained above as with very localized problems, some of them related to land possession and occupation. They were essentially the same types of issues that had poisoned their relationship with the foreign oil companies in some areas. But the rhetoric had changed. If before 1938 petitioners were able to frame their demands through arguments related to the rights they were entitled to as Mexicans, after Pemex took over, people could no longer formulate their petitions in such terms. On the contrary, their demands had to be subsumed in a new type of nationalistic rhetoric—one that would echo the official discourse regarding the expropriation. In defending their land rights against Pemex, workers and peasants could not disturb the peace that the government was striving to attain after the expropriation. Additionally, these communities began to see some changes in their living conditions, but they were simply not extensive enough.

Immediately after March 1938, Pemex began a series of projects to provide housing, roads, schools, and hospitals to the oil fields. In October 1938, for example, Pemex's general manager inaugurated a school in La Laja Veracruz for "one hundred and

twenty students.”<sup>338</sup> The company also began an aggressive campaign to close bars, gambling houses, and brothels in the oil fields. In August of 1938, Lázaro Cárdenas sent a letter to Marte Gómez, Governor of Tamaulipas with instructions to “shut down definitively” all the cantinas that were close to the refinery. Gómez responded that in order for his government to proceed “with absolute energy and uniformity,” he had decided to also shut down various places that supposedly only sold sodas, but where aguardiente was also for sale. He also shut down a restaurant that sold beer.<sup>339</sup>

In some towns near the oil fields, Pemex provided the material for the construction of paved roads, built pipes for the distribution of drinking water, and put up school buildings. In many occasions the directors of different Pemex branches worked closely with municipal presidents and other local authorities to carry out these tasks. The company, however, could not keep up with all the demands that the rapidly growing oil cities posed. The city of Minatitlán, for example, which had been one of the largest petroleum producers, and where the refinery had been operating since 1908, did not have a hospital, a satisfactory system of water distribution, and functioning sewage. The road that communicated Minatitlán with Coatzacoalcos remained half built in 1940, even after the workers began paying a special tax for its construction.<sup>340</sup> Coatzacoalcos itself suffered from the same problems. Pemex workers consistently complained that intestinal

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<sup>338</sup> Vicente Cortés Herrera to Lázaro Cárdenas del Río. Mexico City. October 10, 1938. AGN/LCR, 553/19.

<sup>339</sup> Marte Gómez to Lázaro Cárdenas del Río. Tampico, Tamaulipas. October 12, 1938. AGN/LCR, 553/19.

<sup>340</sup> Nicasio Hernández (STPRM, Section 10) to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 2, 1943. Minatitlán, Veracruz. AGN/MAC, 151.3/514.

parasites and malaria killed a large number of children and adults because the city did not have a water distribution system or sewage.<sup>341</sup>

Other conflicts had to do with housing and land occupation. A group of men from Poza Rica, for example, wrote letters to Manuel Ávila Camacho to say that they were all full-time workers in Pemex, which was a “worthless fact” considering the actions that the company was taking against them. Apparently, Pemex representatives had been showing up at their doorstep to say that the terrains on which they had built their homes had now been purchased by private individuals—in some cases by those representatives themselves—and were being divided by a company from Monterrey to build homes. “These men,” the workers said, “take possession [of the lands] using the power that their representation and post within the company gives them and... they impose bad faith and endanger the tranquility of our homes.”<sup>342</sup>

Problems surrounding housing and access to services also reflected the divisions between members of the STPRM, who had different opinions regarding the future of the industry and the workers’ level of activism. A laborer for the Minatitlán refinery, Ernesto Castelán, wrote to president Manuel Ávila Camacho to say that the local Pemex administration was not only denying him decent housing, but had also cut his electricity and water to supposedly pressure him into supporting the union’s demands to the government. “The house,” said Castelán, “does not have hygienic services and is completely frail.” The strong winds in the region, he added, were “a grave danger” to him and his family. “I have grown tired of asking,” he continued, “my demands for another

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<sup>341</sup> Guillermo Andrade and Antonio Torres to Manuel Ávila Camacho. March 2, 1946. Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. AGN/Ramo Presidentes. MAC, 418.2/190.

<sup>342</sup> Idem.

house have been disregarded.” Moreover, Castelán declared that the company had “rebuilt other workers’ homes and provided them with all sorts of furniture,” whereas the same had not occurred for him. “I have the same rights, but I do not get water, or stove, or beds... All because I am a poor worker,” he concluded. Castelán’s last accusation was that Pemex managers lived “in opulence” and “received (or robbed) large sums of money” from the company.<sup>343</sup>

Pemex also established conflictive relationships with those who were not employed in the company, but lived near the oil camps. In El Ébano, a group of peasants and small merchants, calling themselves “Veterans of the Revolution,” built shacks next to Pemex workers’ homes with authorization from local officials. Until 1942 no one had bothered them and the “children of those poor people recognize[d] El Ébano as their Patria Chica where they were born and raised.”<sup>344</sup> Now, they complained that Pemex and the authorities gave them notice “in a radical manner... and with little respect to these Mexicans,” that their houses were to be dismantled and that they had thirty days to vacate the plot. Petitioners demanded answers as to why they were being treated in a way that made it seem like “they were not Mexicans... As if El Ébano was Territory where only the Chinese should have guarantees [sic].”<sup>345</sup> Pemex responded that the shacks did not comply with the conditions of hygiene that the Health Department required and that they were to be moved outside the camp.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Ernesto Castelán to Manuel Ávila Camacho. Minatitlán, Veracruz. July 31, 1946. AGN/MAC, 135.2/98.

<sup>344</sup> “Veterans of the Revolution” to Manuel Ávila Camacho. El Ébano, San Luis Potosí. August, 1942. AGN/MAC, 509/71.

<sup>345</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>346</sup> Melquiades Saldívar to Manuel Ávila Camacho. El Ébano, San Luis Potosí. August 5, 1942. AGN/MAC, 509/71.

Similar cases occurred in Oaxaca, where the state government gave Pemex rights over plots that were occupied by small peasants.<sup>347</sup> In Minatitlán, a woman complained that the superintendence did not allow her to make improvements to her home and was now trying to take land that she had used to plant fruit trees and flowerbeds.<sup>348</sup> The national company and the federal government had to also define the condition of those who had been affected by the foreign companies and were now reclaiming rights over tracts of land, like in the case of Tacoteno, near Minatitlán, where a man reclaimed a piece of land that had belonged to him and that Pemex had expropriated together with El Águila terrains.<sup>349</sup>

Other issues arose between Pemex and the surrounding communities, fueling further the feeling among those living near the oil fields, that they either belonged and obtained the privileges that Pemex provided or that they were excluded and isolated. Schooling for the children in these communities was one such issue. Pemex built numerous schools and hired teachers in the main areas of petroleum production, but in several instances families complained that the company only admitted the children of oil workers. In La Laja, northern Veracruz, the principal had apparently required that the sons and daughters of Pemex workers be identified by a special report card, which would give them access to the building and to school materials.<sup>350</sup> Residents who were not employed in the company, and who were mainly peasants, complained bitterly, writing to

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<sup>347</sup> Enedina de Jesús García and Andrea García to Manuel Ávila Camacho. Salina Cruz, Oaxaca. August 20, 1940. AGN/MAC, 444.7/240.

<sup>348</sup> Luisa Antonio Vda. de Gómez to Manuel Ávila Camacho. Minatitlán, Veracruz. June 20, 1940, AGN/MAC, 444.7/240.

<sup>349</sup> Baldomero García to Manuel Ávila Camacho. Minatitlán, Veracruz. November 25, 1940. AGN/MAC, 432.2/253.36.

<sup>350</sup> Asociación de Padres de Familia to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 19, 1946. La Laja, Veracruz. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493.

president Ávila Camacho with bitter complaints. “Are we not Mexicans, then? Are we not entitled to benefit from the triumph of the Revolution?... Are we not under a democratic regime, then?” posed one of the letters.<sup>351</sup> The President of the Parents Association complained that this was a discriminatory act that should not occur “in an Industry that is National.” Especially, he continued, because Ávila Camacho had declared that “the industry was expropriated for the benefit of the Mexican People [sic].” The literacy campaign initiated by the president, according to La Laja vecinos, was being “sabotaged by Mexican Petroleum.”<sup>352</sup>

The construction of these “exclusive schools,” even reminded petitioners of the foreign oil companies that Pemex replaced. In 1935 El Águila had attempted to only offer schooling for the children of high-level employees, who were in their majority British. The courts had then forbidden El Águila from denying education to the children of Mexican workers, to which the companies abided. So, in the view of those affected by these measures in the 1940s, it was “neither just nor reasonable that after all these years Pemex would be sabotaging the national educational labor.”<sup>353</sup>

Similar complaints arose in other regions of Veracruz, which united different social groups under one cause. Moreover, even oil workers—whose children in theory could attend school near the oil fields—joined the complaints. In Pueblo Viejo, Veracruz, the director of the local school allegedly received instructions of only admitting the children of the oil laborers who worked in that field, leaving out “children alien [to the

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<sup>351</sup> Jesús Torres and others to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 11, 1946. La Laja, Veracruz. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493.

<sup>352</sup> Asociación de Padres de Familia to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 19, 1946. La Laja, Veracruz. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493.

<sup>353</sup> Asociación de Padres de Familia to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 19, 1946. La Laja, Veracruz. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493.



industry], who are in their majority the sons and daughters of the local peasants.” As a result, continued the letter, “oil workers, merchants, and peasants” had a meeting to voice their discontent and “protest a disposition that is preposterous and damaging for [all] children.”<sup>354</sup>

The disposition did not only go against the nationalistic principles that Pemex supposedly espoused, but it presumably went against the law, too. The Public Education Law (Ley de Educación Pública) stated that agricultural, industrial, or mining centers that were located “more than three kilometers away from the nearest population center, have the obligation of establishing and sustaining schools for primary education for the benefit of the Community in which they are located...”<sup>355</sup> Such was the argument that the representatives of the Parents League and the Education Committee of the oil field Chijol 17. These signers considered that “a privileged caste [was] being established” and that it would be a “mockery and moreover a sarcasm [sic] if Mexican Petroleum were to find support in this determination.” The expropriation of the oil industry, they said, “was for the benefit of the Mexican people, which would turn into a lie if the children of peasants were denied the opportunity of learning how to read and write.”<sup>356</sup> The Secretary of

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<sup>354</sup> Enrique Calatell and others (Liga de Padres de Familia de Mina 3, Pueblo Viejo, Ver.) cit. in Vicente Calderón to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 18, 1946. Jalapa, Veracruz. AGN/Ramo Presidentes-MAC, 534.6/493.

<sup>355</sup> Idem

<sup>356</sup> Juan Meza and others to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 18, 1946. “El Chijol 17” Field, Veracruz. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493. Also, Esteban González and others to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 14, 1946. Horconcitos Jopollal, Veracruz. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493.

Education finally ordered the use of report cards to identify the children of oil workers from other students to stop at once.<sup>357</sup>

Workers considered that it was Pemex's responsibility to provide these services and did not hesitate to use force when necessary. In *El Ébano*, in fact, laborers threatened to organize a work stoppage if Pemex did not begin building "a school, workers' housing, and fix the others schools" at the end of a 15-day period.<sup>358</sup> The administration of Pemex characterized this and other threats against the company as acts of sabotage, instigated by the expropriated companies.

In sum, residents of the oil areas of Veracruz developed a conflictive relationship with the new national company. At first, great enthusiasm surrounded the creation of Mexican Petroleum and the participation of oil workers in the administration of the nationalized industry. Local communities held the belief that Pemex would provide better salaries, housing, labor conditions, and a respect for the Mexican working class that had so many times suffered abuses from foreign managers. Though in many cases Pemex did provide what laborers and their families desired, the difficulties that the company itself encountered when trying to unify the oil industry, as well as the production crisis that it suffered during the first years of operation, tainted the first approach between Pemex, its new employees, and the communities that lived near the oil fields. Moreover, the almost immediate realization that the national company in many ways resembled the foreign enterprises—Pemex high functionaries moved to the foreign managers' houses and

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<sup>357</sup> Lucas Ortiz to José Hermenegildo Castañón. March 28, 1946. Mexico City. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493. Lucas Ortiz to Norberto Illan. February 27, 1946. Mexico City. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493.

<sup>358</sup> Francisco Martínez Cabrera to Manuel Ávila Camacho. February 23, 1946. *El Ébano*, San Luis Potosí. AGN/MAC, 534.6/493.

earned as much as those foreigners had, for example—produced great discontent among workers and their families.

### **Conclusion**

The previous chapter showed that the expropriation and agrarian laws of the 1930s helped diffuse the agrarian radicalism that had grown in Veracruz during the preceding decade. In this one I argued that the creation of Pemex achieved a similar goal, but one that was mainly focused on neutralizing the strong oil labor militancy that Lázaro Cárdenas had encouraged and that ignited the process of expropriation. This militancy, however, turned into a liability for Pemex's consolidation. I contended here that one of the ways in which the federal government dealt with a recalcitrant oil workers' union after the expropriation, was through an aggressive campaign that placed Pemex and the oil industry in the center of the discourse on national patrimony. Such discourse stressed the interdependence of the promises of the revolution—mainly land reform and workers' rights—with the nationalization of strategic industries, and national unity under a corporatist system. How this rhetoric translated on the ground was through a fundamental intolerance for any action that was anything but supportive of the new national industry.

Oil workers acquired a large debt when Cárdenas nationalized the industry to defend their rights, but they also saw their union independence and democracy challenged by the centralization of Mexican Petroleum. In the 1940s, the oil labor union lived one of its most difficult periods. Two main trends existed among militant workers: the “official,” which strove for the subordination of the life of the union to the decisions of the PRM and the government—a government that adopted strong measures to neutralize political radicalisms, including labor activism. And a second one, which could

be called “democratic,” which tried to consolidate the union as an autonomous force vis à vis the power of the official confederations and of the state.

The dispute ended in 1949 when official forces were able, mainly through violent means, to dominate the STPRM by imposing union leaders loyal to the federal government. Such type of event, which was repeated in other laboring groups—the railroads for example—has been called the *golpe charro*, or the “strike of bossism.” The advent of these relatively new characters in the Mexican political landscape—the labor *caciques* (local strongmen) or *charros* (union bosses)—was result of the “institutionalization” of popular organizations and the government actions that tended to neutralize any hint of dissidence coming from laboring groups.

Such institutionalization was achieved mainly through the forceful integration of labor unions into government-approved confederation and the cooptation of union leadership. The success of the official confederations depended in great part on the work of power brokers loyal to the party. These brokers played the political game in ways that were not much different from how other middlemen had in the past, basically through clientelist practices. However, the growth of these organizations in power and membership took away their focus from their communities and put it onto national arena. Local leaders discovered that they could keep their constituents in check through a mix of *pan y palo* (basically “silver and lead”) as long as they kept their superiors happy. How these brokers interacted with their respective popular groups and with the central government looked differently depending on the level of local political participation, economic power, and strategic position of different regions. The middlemen in the oil

industry, in particular, became figures of tremendous power, holding control over both the industry and the oil workers' union. Such is the focus of the next chapter.

### **Chapter 5: Political Control in the Mexican Oil Fields**

PRI is haven for assassins and the pistols they keep in their pockets. The same goes for the leaders of Section 30, who are also assassins. They are untouchable. There is no justice in this town. The President of the State Tribunal of Justice, deputies, judges, wardens, municipal agents, they are all thieves and killers. They abuse the peasants... Jaime Merino protects those assassins. Together they have managed to mock human justice... They have stolen our national patrimony.

-Juan Santos, Poza Rica, Veracruz. June 20, 1960.

This chapter uses the case of a man named Jaime Merino, superintendent of the Poza Rica branch of Mexican Petroleum from 1941 to 1959, to analyze the origins and development of caciquista practices within Pemex and of union bossism (charrismo) within the National Oil Workers' Union. I argue here that Merino provides a privileged example of the type of power brokers that arose in Mexico with the growth of the oil industry. I demonstrate that he was able to control the expansion of Poza Rica and dominate the region's politics, but only until macropolitical and economic circumstances changed the political culture among common folk in Mexico. When the people of Poza Rica began demanding better working and living conditions, as well as a more active participation in the politics of the municipality during the 1950s, Merino responded with a type of force that could no longer work in the changing national political landscape.

Indeed, between the transformation of the PRM into the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI for its Spanish acronym) in 1946 and the beginning of the presidential period of Adolfo López Mateos in 1958, a new type of citizen was born in Mexico—one that was the result of economic and industrial growth, a member of the

middle class.<sup>359</sup> A new way of making politics was born as well, where an “indivisible peace” was to be attained at almost any cost and where state violence was used all too often to neutralize dissident groups. This was a period that has been known as “Pax Priísta,” but when peace was in very important ways little more than a myth.<sup>360</sup>

As I show here, some groups in Poza Rica felt deep discontent with Jaime Merino’s repressive politics and caciquista practices concerning housing and public services. The constant feeling that the Superintendent was stripping the nation of its most valued asset increased such dissatisfaction. Indeed, the indiscriminate use he made of Pemex resources and the unrestrained access he had to the company’s coffers, made some in Poza Rica say that Merino “stole the patrimony of the nation.” A sin that seemed as hard to forgive as all the others.<sup>361</sup> Revealing how Merino and the people who either supported or opposed him understood the notions of public, private, and national property allows us to see the type of material and ideological control that the national oil company—through its union and its brokers—exercised over the political and civic life of

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<sup>359</sup> See Blanca Torres, *México en la Segunda Guerra Mundial: historia de la Revolución Mexicana* 19 (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1984); Idem, *Hacia la utopía industrial: historia de la Revolución Mexicana* 21 (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1984); Ilán Semo, *El ocaso de los mitos (1958-1968). México: Un pueblo en la historia* 6. Coordinated by Enrique Semo (México: Alianza Editorial, 1989); Ignacio Marván. “La política del frente popular y la formación del PRM,” in *75 años de sindicalismo mexicano*, coordinated by Alejandra Moreno Toscano and Samuel León González (México: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1986) 515-542; Kevin Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>360</sup> Middlebrook, *The Paradox*; Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax-Priísta, 1940-1962* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008; Pensado, 2013); Jaime M. Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>361</sup> Mr. Isaac Ortega Lara to Adolfo López Mateos, Poza Rica, Veracruz, February 13, 1960. AGN/ALM), 703.4/23.

the region. It also shows how some key actors conceived public property as a kind of individual property.

To demonstrate this, I first provide details about Poza Rica's development from oil camp to one of the largest cities in Veracruz. Poza Rica was born as an enclave of the most important industry in the country. Depopulated until the onset of oil production, that region in northern Veracruz remained a meeting point between the rural and the urban well until the 1940s. In the fifties, after becoming a municipality of its own, the area began experiencing its starkest period of urban, industrial, and demographic growth, almost entirely related to oil production and its secondary industries—a localized growth that nonetheless reflected the economic and political changes that were occurring throughout the country. In this section, I also show the specific characteristics of the Poza Rica branch of the National Oil Workers' Union, as well as the role that the union played in local politics.

In the second part of the chapter, I provide general reflections about the characteristics of the cacique and labor charro, and relate them to the particularities of Jaime Merino's case. I then show how Merino, by developing a clientelist relationship with construction companies, agrarian authorities, and union leadership, was able to control not only the politics of the town, but its territory, housing, and resources. This was crucial, as in other cases of cacicazgo, for the growth of Merino's power. Lastly, I analyze the development of the coalition that was finally able to oust Merino as a new type of civic participation that came with oil communities' growing concern for their role in the political life of the country.

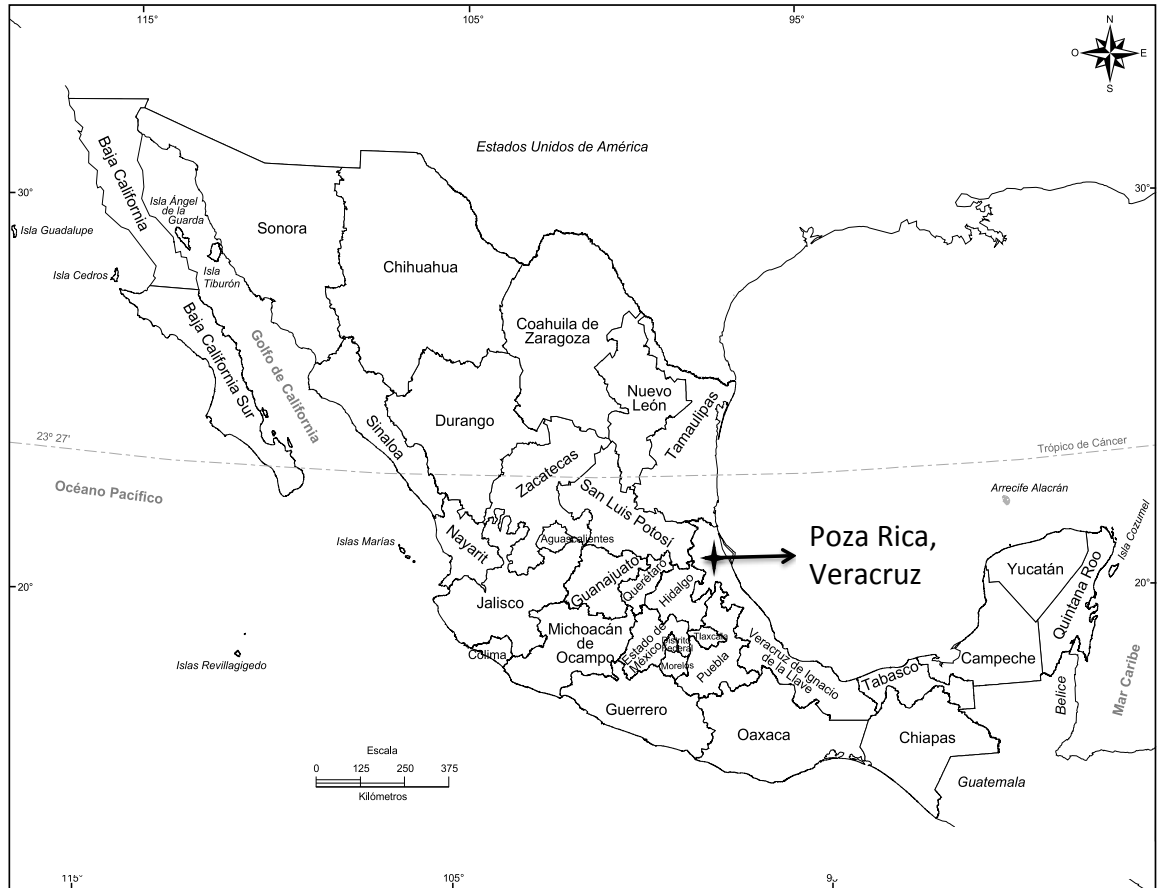
Merino, though not a familiar name in the pantheon of fallen agents of the postrevolutionary regime, is a character that embodied the political, economic, and social changes just described. In the end, however, he was slow to become a more modern version of the Priista power broker and was quickly and vociferously ousted from the party, from Pemex, and from the country. This chapter provides an overview of his rise and demise. It also relates Merino's story to the advent of a new political class and a new citizen in Mexico. As other post-1940s Mexico literatures do, the chapter shows that peace under PRI came at the expense of union democracy and an autonomous peasantry. This fact, however, did not and has not stopped dissident groups from continuing to fight against this central power that overlooked each region's needs and idiosyncrasies through a so-called "absolute unification" under the banner of the postrevolutionary regime.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> For more on Mexico's 1950s-60s political culture see, Semo, *El ocaso*; Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Padilla, *Rural Resistance*; Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*; Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization*; Paul Gillingham and Benjamin Smith, *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938-1968* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).



### Map 3 – Poza Rica, Veracruz

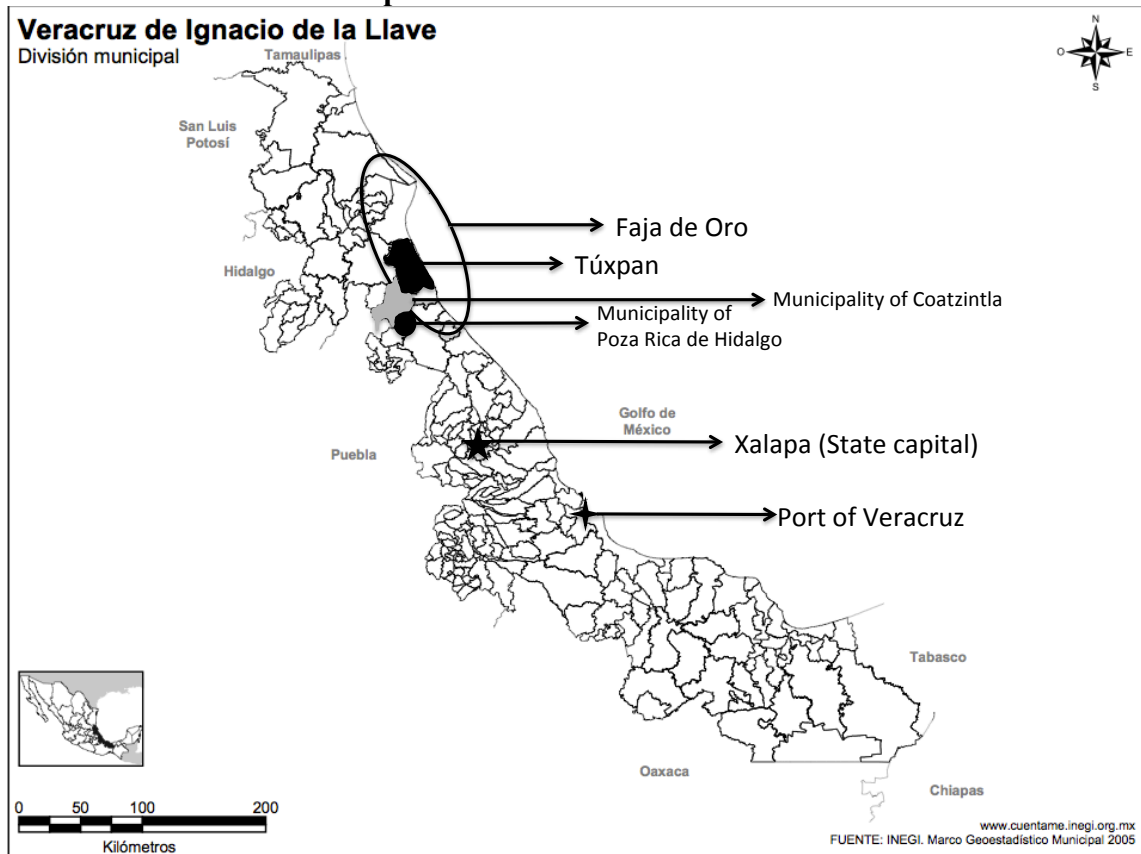


Source: Author’s own elaboration on map by Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística (INEGI) - [http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/mapas/pdf/nacional/div\\_territorial/nacionalestados.pdf](http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/mapas/pdf/nacional/div_territorial/nacionalestados.pdf)

Until now, this dissertation has dealt with the development of a relationship between Mexicans’ property rights and the patrimonialist principles of the postrevolutionary regime. I have explained this phenomenon through an analysis of oil workers’ agrarian interests. This chapter now moves to the implications that such relationship had for the members of the National Oil Workers’ Union, as well as to the social politics surrounding the nationalized oil industry. I show here one powerful

example of the practical implications behind the development of Mexico’s modern industry and the sociopolitical consequences of such industrialization. The specific groups dealt with here—Poza Rica’s oil workers, specifically—that became affected by this process had an understanding of their property and citizenship rights that many times went against the ideals that the official party and its brokers espoused during the 1940s and 50s. At the same time, such ideals were quickly changing and, in the case of Merino, not keeping pace with such change proved fatal.

**Map 4 – Coatzintla and Poza Rica**



Source: Author’s own elaboration on map by Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística, Mexico.  
[www.inegi.gov](http://www.inegi.gov)

## The History of an Oil Town

Since the early 1900s US, British, and Dutch companies opened oil wells throughout northeastern Mexico, an area that was then called “The Golden Belt” (“Faja de Oro”). In 1921, Mexico was the second largest producer in the world, providing 25 percent of the oil consumed globally, but a steady decline through 1930 left output at 20 percent of what it had been ten years before. People talked about a Mexican oil crisis. The traditional zones of petroleum production were declining, but new deposits were also discovered, among them the Las Choapas field in the south and Poza Rica in the north of Veracruz. The Poza Rica camps opened in 1929 by El Águila. Thanks to these new wells, the British company became the main producer in Mexico, dominating 59% of the market. From 1934 to 1936, Poza Rica went from yielding 9% of the national oil, to 34%, producing 590,104 cubic meters in 1934 and 2,182,231 in 1936.<sup>363</sup> Together with other camps in the same area, northern Veracruz produced close to half of the petroleum that was being extracted in Mexico.<sup>364</sup> The strategic value of Poza Rica kept increasing after the construction of the oil pipes that took crude to the refinery in Azcapotzalco, Mexico City (built in 1933) and to Salamanca, Guanajuato (built in 1950).<sup>365</sup>

Before the discovery of the Poza Rica oil reserves, landownership in northern Veracruz was deeply concentrated.<sup>366</sup> Around 1872 the Huasteca region had been

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<sup>363</sup> Pemex, *El petróleo*, 186.

<sup>364</sup> Olvera, *Poza Rica*, 123.

<sup>365</sup> Fabio Barbosa Cano, “El colapso del cacicazgo merinista en Poza Rica: ‘La matanza de Los Goyos’,” in *Veracruz, un tiempo para contar... Memoria del I Seminario de Historia Regional*, edited by Mirna Benítez, Carmen Blázquez, et al. (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1989).

<sup>366</sup> See Frans J. Schryer, “Peasants and the Law: a History of Land Tenure and Conflict in the Huasteca,” in *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18: 2 (Nov. 1986): 283-311.

surveyed and apportioned as part of the liberal land privatization program. Between that year and 1930, a few families managed to buy and control most of the territory, which had been divided into five great plots—Corralillo, Troncones, Potrerillo, Poza Rica, and Poza de Cuero. By 1929, El Águila began leasing from these families and obtaining oil concessions. The British company paid \$10.00 annually per hectare and 5 percent of the production from the wells.<sup>367</sup> In exchange, El Águila achieved control over these lands, which the company used for exploration and production. Even though these were private plots, what is now Poza Rica was practically depopulated until 1930, except for the people who lived in Poza de Cuero, where the railroad station was located.

After confirming the value of the Poza Rica deposits between 1930 and 1931, El Águila managers moved 156 oil workers from the nearby Palma Sola fields to the new camp. By December 1932, Poza Rica had 894 inhabitants, but word soon spread throughout the state and neighboring areas that in the new oil fields employment was guaranteed. Starting in 1932, then, many men and women traveled to northern Veracruz to work in the oil industry, but also in search for employment in the railroads, construction, and in the oil-company offices.<sup>368</sup> Starting in 1935, PETROMEX, the only Mexican oil enterprise at that point, also began drilling in this area, but on federal lands, not on private plots.<sup>369</sup> By 1938 Poza Rica was the most important oil field in the nation and the Mexican government invested heavily in infrastructure and exploration in the area, which was now called “the new Golden Belt” and made Poza Rica the “petroleum capital” of the country.

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<sup>367</sup> Pemex, *El petróleo*, 183.

<sup>368</sup> *Idem*, 182.

<sup>369</sup> Ella F. Quintal Avilés, “Petróleo y sociedad: la urbanización de Poza Rica,” *Cuicuilco* 17. *Revista de la Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (April-June 1986): 26.

The new oil fields attracted thousands of workers from different origins and backgrounds. Some were experienced laborers that migrated from other oil fields, like Palma Sola. Others were industrial workers that had worked in the railroads, sugar mills, who were mechanics, or even oilmen who had been laid off during the oil crisis of the 1920s. Next to experienced industrial laborers, worked individuals of rural extraction who had migrated from the Huasteca region, especially from the municipalities of Ozuluama, Tempoal, Pánuco, and Tuxpan. These peasants were familiar with the development of oil and other industries, and had many times worked in areas of commodity production, like Papantla, where vanilla was produced at a large scale in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>370</sup>

Many of these workers arrived to Poza Rica with the belief that they would stay in the fields for a short period of time and then return to their towns with enough money to start small businesses or buy a plot of land. Therefore, the fact that at the onset of Poza Rica's development, all infrastructures—offices, railroad stations, and workers' homes—were of low quality and easily transportable was not a serious matter. But the size of the oil reserves in the area gave way to more permanent settlements and great demographic growth. Even after the enormous size of the Poza Rica reserves was established and more people arrived each day to seek work in the area, however, El Águila did not make significant efforts to build better and more housing for workers. Little by little the workers who did not find a suitable place to stay began settling in the surrounding areas, like Poza de Cuero or Coatzintla.

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<sup>370</sup> Kouri, *A Pueblo Divided*.

With the purpose of retaining skilled laborers—turners and welders, for example—when it became clear that the Poza Rica fields would have long life, El Águila began building small homes made of wood that were assigned to married workers and their families. But more people arrived to the area than the houses the company was able to build could hold. The discontent that laborers experienced due to lack of clean and decent housing was exacerbated by the comfortable living conditions in which the managers lived. Not very different from those in other oil camps, the enclosed “villages” that foreign bosses occupied were more conspicuous in Poza Rica, since this was an isolated camp and not a city. Also, bosses’ homes were located on the hills that surrounded the oil field and were visible to workers at all times.

These differences in living conditions, as well as the lack of housing for El Águila workers, led many to settle in terrains that belonged to the company and were destined for oil production. The company made numerous attempts to prevent these invasions, writing extensively to the Ministry of Communications (Secretaría de Comunicaciones) to ask that the authorities “do not allow those Federal zones to be given in rental agreements for the building of [workers’] houses, for this will soon become an artery of invasion [sic] to our Field.”

Foreign managers considered that allowing people to settle in those areas would surely translate in monetary losses for the company, so they asked the federal government to turn them into “exclusive zones of oil production and not be destined for any other use.”<sup>371</sup> In May of 1936, for example, Allen Payne, executive of El Águila, wrote a letter to a Mexican colleague discussing the invasion of Poza de Cuero. In his missive, Payne

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<sup>371</sup> H.N. Branch to the Ministry of Communications, Tampico, Tamaulipas, December 3, 1937. Pemex Archive, Box 522, File 14369.

lamented that several merchants had settled in areas belonging to El Águila and that “...the local authorities [were] not taking the necessary measures.” He added, “soon there will be an invasion en masse.”<sup>372</sup> “This situation,” continued Payne, “occurs in every lot near Poza Rica... And, although some federal troops have helped us in the past, every day we are faced with [the invaders’] complete lack of respect for the authorities.”<sup>373</sup> Despite these efforts, however, individuals and families continued to settle there.

Only with the creation of El Águila’s Local Union, were workers able to demand better housing and obtain protection from their organization. With additional support from local military authorities, many workers were finally allowed to build their shacks on company lands.<sup>374</sup> These arrangements, plus the invasions that had already taken place, characterized the haphazard urban growth of Poza Rica. During the 1930s, there were really no streets and no public services, pushing people to walk on muddy paths and obtain drinking water from the company’s wells, the access to which was many times forbidden.

This urban growth also attracted small merchants who opened myriad stores, canteens, saloons, brothels, and retail shops. These small businesses brought with them workers from the respective industries—waiters, clerks, dancers, musicians, cooks, and sex-workers—producing an even larger demographic growth. El Águila managers repeatedly tried to have some of these businesses shut down, especially the saloons and brothels, because many of them were in company lands, which went against the Labor Codes of the time. Others were actually housed on plots that had been given to workers

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<sup>372</sup> Allen Payne to Luis Acuña, May 4, 1936. Pemex Archive, Box 306, File 8816,

<sup>373</sup> *Idem*

<sup>374</sup> Pemex, *El petróleo en Veracruz*, 187.

who sublet them to these businesses. The Cardenista administration and the National Oil Workers' Union also tried to close bars and brothels, considering that the selling of liquor and sex within industrial centers would be "like transacting with the workers' health, for more than a few have lost their jobs and many their lives."<sup>375</sup> Many also complained that such businesses promoted alcoholism among workers, as well as the spread of venereal diseases.<sup>376</sup>

The most intensive immigration to Poza Rica took place between 1940 and 1950, a moment when the city held "opportunities for everyone."<sup>377</sup> By 1951, a little over 35,000 people lived there, making it the fifth largest urban center in Veracruz and one of the most important industrial cities in Mexico. Indeed, by the early 1950s, Poza Rica produced three fourths of Mexican crude, contributing greatly to the national industrialization project. The town became a congregation (*congregación*) of the municipality of Coatzintla in 1935, but it was not until 1951 that it became a municipality of its own (*municipio libre*)—interestingly a result of the intense "lobbying" done by Section 30 of the National Oil Workers' Union, which I will address later in the chapter. Then, Poza Rica saw its most accelerated growth during the 1950s, when the "New Golden Belt" really began giving fruits, and when Mexican Petroleum invested heavily on that area. These changes coincided with a new demand for workers. The most

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<sup>375</sup> David Cano García to General de División Juan Soto Lara, Poza Rica, Veracruz. July 24, 1940. AGN/LCR, File 553/72.

<sup>376</sup> Pemex, *El petróleo in Veracruz*, 187.

<sup>377</sup> See Ella F. Quintal Avilés, "Antropología de una ciudad obrera," *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* 9, No. 2 (May-Aug., 1994): 430. Also, Luis Unikel, "Urbanismo y urbanización: situación y perspectivas," in *Disyuntivas sociales; presente y futuro de la sociedad mexicana II*, ed. Miguel Wionczek (México: SEP, 1971).



important new discoveries occurred in 1953, 55, and 56, so between 1946 and 1956, an increased labor force became a large part of the city's population.

Mexico's industrialization impetus of the 1950s led to the development of new social and political relations in places that had originated as oil camps in the 1920s and 30s, but that by 1950 had become large cities with thousands of residents. The social pressure that had pushed the agrarian reform in the thirties now moved to the growing urban centers and its many economic attractions, where new migrants had to fight for housing, public services, workers' rights, and political representation. Additionally, in a place like Poza Rica, the control that labor unions held over certain industries and areas of the city shaped the lives of thousands of residents.

Although the struggles led by the Mexican working class in the 1950s generally resulted in the cooptation of union leaders, the incarceration of staunch militants, and a general repression of dissident groups, it is undeniable that the power that they had acquired in the 1930s made industrial laborers a dominant force; at least one that the political elite tended to treat with caution. In an effort to keep them in check, then—especially in strategic areas for industrial production—the regime relied on agents who, for the official favor, guaranteed laborers' loyalty. In the particular case of Poza Rica, these agents proved invaluable in keeping peace and order in an area that was strategic for the national industrialization project of the post-war period, as well as among a population that showed an increasing desire to participate in local and national politics. Jaime Merino, cacique and labor charro, was one such negotiator.

### **The History of a Labor Union**

The difficulties in Poza Rica caused by lack of housing, the spread of disease—venereal and gastrointestinal illnesses, as well as yellow fever and malaria were the most prevalent—the isolation, and the tense relationship with the company, slowly united workers into supportive communities. Poza Rica was in fact born together with the strong labor unionism that characterized the oil industry in the early 1930s. It was an uphill battle against El Águila, but with help from the Tampico local chapter, Poza Rica workers were able to unionize in 1932. By the time the Poza Rica fields started functioning at full speed in 1936, oil workers in other areas had gone through bloody battles among local unions, management, and the companies' private police. They had already negotiated collective contracts and gone on massive strikes. Some who arrived to Poza Rica from Palma Sola already had experience in union organization and negotiation. Others who got there between 1932 and 1936 were in fact experienced union militants and skilled organizers, which is why very soon the Poza Rica section of El Águila's Union of Laborers and Employees (Sindicato de Trabajadores y Empleados de la Compañía Mexicana de Petróleo El Águila) became an important presence among the different local oil workers' unions.

Oil unionization in Mexico occurred in direct relation to the geographic distribution of laborers. When workers started fighting to form local branches, they did not organize by trade, which is what has traditionally been done in other industries. They organized by company instead. In other words, there was a local union for El Águila, another for Huasteca Co, one more for Gulf Co., and so on. Within those company unions, there were sections for each. The Poza Rica branch became Delegation 2 of El Águila Union's Section 1.

In 1935, the leaders of the different company chapters formed the National Oil Workers' Union (STPRM) with the blessing of president Cárdenas. Having a national organization allowed workers to negotiate a collective contract for the majority of oil workers in the country and to organize massive strikes to pressure foreign companies into salary raises, shorter shifts, and safety measures. The STPRM absorbed most laborers in the industry and began controlling the negotiations with the companies. In 1937, Poza Rica's Delegation 2 had become Section 30 of the STPRM. While the National Oil Workers' Union turned into one of the most powerful labor organizations in the country, the Poza Rica branch acquired extraordinary strength within Pemex because the field gathered both experienced laborers and staunch union militants.

From very early on, it became clear that the connection between Poza Rica and the rest of country, but most importantly Mexico City, was crucial for a well-functioning industry and a thriving economy. Anything that could disrupt the flow of crude from northern Veracruz to Mexico City became a direct threat to the economic stability of the country. A tropical storm in 1944, for example, stopped the distribution of oil from Poza Rica, costing factories, transportation, and workers thousands of pesos for lack of oil and gasoline. This connection also made labor disputes in Poza Rica particularly delicate. Any stoppage or strike translated into immediate loss for the capital and the rest of the country. In this context, internal harmony among oil workers became crucial.<sup>378</sup>

The central role that Poza Rica played in the country's economy also meant that anyone who controlled the politics of the STPRM and other workers' coalitions in the area would hold the keys to the political, economic, and social stability in the center of

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<sup>378</sup> Barbosa Cano, "El colapso," 24.

the country. Moreover, he who held the keys for land access and housing in Poza Rica had tremendous power over the workers and thus over oil production in the area. Therefore, individuals in high-level posts in Pemex garnered tremendous power over local territory and infrastructure. Even before the 1938 expropriation, for example, superintendents—who were basically the highest administrative authorities in each local branch—had the authority to approve any land petition for workers' housing. This meant that anyone who was in need of a place to live had to go to the Superintendencia to obtain a permit.<sup>379</sup> These functionaries also had control over Pemex's infrastructure and vehicles, which they many times used for their own benefit. The leaders of the STPRM made accusations in 1940s, for example, that the superintendent allowed Pemex vehicles to transport "liquors and alcoholic beverages" to Poza Rica. This occurred despite the Union's efforts to follow Lázaro Cárdenas's directives against the consumption of beer, wine, and other alcoholic drinks in work camps and industrial centers. "Merchants continue to transport beer in clandestine form," said the Secretary of STPRM's Section 30 in 1940, "in vehicles that belong to Mexican Petroleum."<sup>380</sup>

In fact, the control of the union over local politics transcended the city. As mentioned above, Poza Rica became a municipality of its own in 1951, separating the "oil capital of the country" from its original municipal center (cabecera municipal), Coatzintla. Until this moment, municipal officials of Coatzintla had jurisdictional authority over Poza Rica, which meant that the local powers that began arising—mostly union leaders—were still subordinated to those officials. However, the economic

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<sup>379</sup> Allen Payne to C. L. Argüelles, Tampico, Tamaulipas, December 15, 1936. Pemex Archive, Box 522 File 14369.

<sup>380</sup> David Cano García (STPRM) to General de División Juan Soto Lara, Poza Rica, Veracruz. July 24, 1940. AGN/LCR, File 553/72.

opportunities that the oil industry itself offered to high-rank laborers and the power that the union acquired nationally, gave union officials much ground for negotiation with the state government and the federal authorities. Then, the individual interests of some of these leaders led them to push for the autonomy of Poza Rica from Coatzintla. This meant that having municipal authorities friendly to the union and willing to establish a clientelist relationship with senior laborers became a beneficial situation for all involved, except obviously Coatzintla, which lost more than half of its population and important economic returns from the oil industry.<sup>381</sup> Poza Rica became a thriving city in the 1950s, while Coatzintla dwindled as a municipality with considerable territory, but little resources. Not only that, but Coatzintla became the recipient of the lowest level of Pemex workers who were not able to find housing in Poza Rica proper and settled, many times informally, on Coatzintla territories.

Most officials in the new municipality of Poza Rica were oil workers with little to no experience in public administration, but very willing to reach into Pemex's pocket to help their union brothers or private companies when the time came to obtain construction permits and equipment maintenance contracts, as the case of Merino will attest.<sup>382</sup> This political and territorial phenomenon, tells us much, as anthropologist Ella Quintal has established, about the "the permanent control that union held over the formal and informal power of [the] municipality."<sup>383</sup>

Most of the land that comprised the new municipio belonged to Petróleos Mexicanos, which either pushed workers to look for homes in the neighboring

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<sup>381</sup> Quintal, "Petróleo y sociedad," 29.

<sup>382</sup> *Idem*, 30.

<sup>383</sup> Quintal, "Antropología de una ciudad," 431.

communities, having to travel to Poza Rica during the day to work or ask the superintendent for lands on which to build their homes. By the early 1950s the city of Poza Rica proper was completely occupied by Pemex workers or laborers from related companies. Therefore, new arrivals usually meant informal settlements in the outskirts of the city, creating a number of workers' colonies—colonies Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Antonio M. Quirasco, and others—closer to Coatzintla or Tihuatlán than to Poza Rica proper. These informal settlements and Pemex's power over the area's real estate, added to the control that the STPRM held over the places where workers were allowed to live, created great land speculation from which individuals like Merino benefitted.

### **The History of a Cacique**

Frequently used to describe the reign of strongmen that rely on clientelism to form political alliances and maintain power, the term “caciquismo” is still elusive, though scholars have agreed on some core characteristics of the cacique: a regional boss whose very personal control of local politics typically rests on a combination of family and *compadrazgo* networks.<sup>384</sup> The cacique rules through a combination of patronage resources and coercive action, including the constant threat or actual use of physical violence against rivals. Caciques are also very creative at obtaining and maintaining a social following. Caciques can coopt traditional celebrations, community festivities, and

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<sup>384</sup> For this section, I have relied on the definitions of *cacicazgo* provided by the following works: Antonio Ugalde, *Power and Conflict in a Mexican Community: A Study of Political Integration* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1970); Wayne Cornelius, “A Structural Analysis of Urban Caciquismo in Mexico,” *Urban Anthropology* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall, 1972): 237-9; David Brading, *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Alan Knight and Will Pansters, eds. *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2005); Kevin Middlebrook, “Caciquismo and Democracy: Mexico and Beyond,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 28, No. 33 (2009).

communal work to establish a relationship between their activities and people's religious and civic beliefs. The extensive network of the cacique includes family members, friends, "clients," and compadres, many of who are also community leaders and in many cases leaders of labor unions.

Scholars have traditionally studied caciquismo as a phenomenon that occurs in the countryside and goes against the processes of modernization and industrialization, but more recent analyses have challenged this view and have provided examples of caciquista practices that occur in urban environments and many times in places where agriculture and industrialization exist side by side.<sup>385</sup> In fact, historian Ilán Semo has said that the industrial version of the traditional cacique is the labor *charro*, a figure that represents quite literally a "fusion of Mexico's two worlds: the campesino culture and the proletarian culture... [a] conjunction between corporatism and nationalism."<sup>386</sup>

The charro is a labor leader usually hand-picked by the government; state or federal, to control unions and make sure that production is not affected by labor conflicts or workers' militancy. This type of union boss exerts control over the internal procedures of their respective unions, as well as the different resources—job posts, health services, housing, schooling for children—that laborers need to lead a decent existence. Because he also needs to keep production in check, the charro/cacique ensures that workers have enough access to those resources through a combination of negotiation, favoritism, and control. When this balance is broken, however, the charro can no longer stay in power.

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<sup>385</sup> Some examples are Knight and Pansters, *Caciquismo*; also Marcos Águila and Jeffrey Bortz, "The Rise of Gangsterism and Charrismo: Labor Violence and the Postrevolutionary Mexican State," in *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur*, edited by Wil G. Pansters (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 185-211.

<sup>386</sup> Semo, *El ocaso*, 38. Also, Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 38-9.

Salvador Maldonado Aranda has argued that among the different types of urban and industrial cacicazgos, the union boss represents the most “finished” prototype of authoritarian tradition because “the labour leader is... recognized, promoted and ratified as an intermediary by the state.”<sup>387</sup> Additionally, because in Mexico only one union can manage the relations between workers and the administration of any particular company—e.g. Pemex and the STPRM, the National Railroad and the National Railroad Workers’ Union, the Telephone Operators’ Union and the Telephone and TeleFigure Company, etc.—union bosses can use their power to hire or fire employees, or to deny a particular worker of the rights supposedly granted by the union, based on the relationship they have with state officials. Indeed, through their legal and corporatist control of labor organizations, “caciques come to exercise power in a personalized, arbitrary—often violent—way, because the positions of ‘authority’ and ‘leadership’ they occupy constitute a platform from which they can effectively resolve labour-related conflicts” with the state.<sup>388</sup>

The oil industry offers “unparalleled possibilities” to attain personal economic growth, especially compared to rural cacicazgos that can appropriate only meager amounts of extra product.<sup>389</sup> The oil caciques, by controlling and having the favor of those who work in the most important industry in the country, garnered unprecedented power not only locally, but nationally as well—as would be the case with Joaquín Hernández Galicia “La Quina,” for example. The control they held over union organization and regional branches of national confederations allowed them to also

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<sup>387</sup> Salvador Maldonado Aranda, “Between Law and Arbitrariness: Labour Union Caciques in Mexico,” in Knight and Pansters, 230.

<sup>388</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>389</sup> Barbosa Cano, “El colapso,” 27.



control PRI's local posts. Jaime Merino, for example, was allegedly partner in a law firm that paid for federal deputy Pedro Vivanco's office building, worth \$80,000. That money, informants said, came directly from Pemex's treasury.<sup>390</sup> The access he had to unlimited resources—including land—through his relationship to Pemex, and the ways through which he “administered” and distributed those resources, made Merino the faithful figure of the labor charro and urban cacique.

Because the relationship between government institutions and the oil cacique is clientelist and succeeds through the very basic exchange of giving the central power good results in production and operation of the industry, peace within the labor union is indispensable. The personal relationships between union charros and government officials “at the municipal or state levels and between these figures, union delegates, and businessmen, transport leaders, and housing developers... allowed the establishment of enclaves of local power,” in which the cacique proved fundamental.<sup>391</sup> This is particularly true for an industry where government and union established an unmovable pact—Cardenas supported the formation of the National Oil Workers' Union in 1935 in exchange for laborers' loyalty and discipline under state directives. When oil laborers began expressing serious disconformities toward Pemex after 1938, the state relied on brokers—Merino among them—who were able to control, as well as to address, those disconformities.

Jaime Merino arrived to Poza Rica in 1939 to work in Pemex's Corps of Engineers. Born in the state of Jalisco during the Mexican revolution, his mother moved

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<sup>390</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, Petróleos Mexicanos General Director, February 9, 1953. AGN/Ramo Presidentes, ARC, 432/9. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

<sup>391</sup> Middlebrook, “Caciquismo,” 239.

the whole family to Los Angeles, California when Merino's father died. Young Jaime attended high school in Los Angeles and then the School of Engineering first at UCLA and later at Berkeley. After the death of his mother, Merino returned to Mexico to work in the Department of Public Works in Jalisco. With the nationalization of the oil industry, Mexican Petroleum began hiring qualified personnel, since foreign companies had brought in most engineers and skilled workers from the US, Great Britain, and other countries, who left with their employers in 1938. Merino began his career in Pemex at the Tuxpan branch, but was very quickly transferred to Poza Rica where oil was being produced at a faster pace than anywhere else in the country. Climbing the ladder very quickly, Merino was named Chief of Engineers in 1940 and superintendent of the Poza Rica Pemex branch in 1941. He was 27 years old.

Merino knew very early on how to build his own network of popularity. There was no act, event, rally, or ceremony to which he did not attend, always wearing his distinctive saracoff hat. When the Cazonces River overflowed, causing historical damages, there was Merino on the first line, helping the victims. When a gas leak killed several in the neighborhood Flores Magón the engineer helped carry the coffins. When the old market caught fire Merino was there, "putting his life on the line like the rest of us," said one Pemex worker, "contributing with his personal effort".<sup>392</sup> Indeed, many residents considered Merino's work in the area to be of great value and "the transformation of Poza Rica from a tropical forest to a true emporium [sic]" impossible without Merino.<sup>393</sup> Local workers' newspaper *El Crisol* called him "a tireless and optimistic promoter of [Poza

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<sup>392</sup> Barbosa Cano, "El colapso," 26.

<sup>393</sup> Benito Vela to President Adolfo López Mateos, Poza Rica, Ver. Dec. 17, 1956. AGN/ALM, 709/23.

Rica's] progress... and a passionate defender of popular education."<sup>394</sup> The engineer was a great baseball aficionado and liked to play 3<sup>rd</sup> base. He built a state-of-the-art basketball court and contributed money to local teams.<sup>395</sup>

Moreover, Merino established links with all spheres of political and judicial power, civic and social life in Poza Rica. In fact, some elements who were allegedly in Pemex's payroll per Merino's orders were: "the Commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion and his personnel, the Municipal President and his staff, the Police Commander and his staff, the President of the local Workers' Confederation branch, the Federal Deputy for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Electoral District, the administrator of the 'Poza Rica' market, the Director and Administrator of newspaper *El Herald*... the Forestry Agent of the Region, Traffic Police Officers, the drivers of the Film Commission, the Basketball and Baseball teams... And others."<sup>396</sup> His connections to businessmen, other functionaries, and his ability to keep oil production in check allowed Merino to extend his compadrazgo network, which translated into control over the internal politics of the Oil Workers' Union and the politics not only of Poza Rica, but an extensive area in the Huasteca region.

In her study of Mexico City caciquismo Diane Davis has found that "urban expansion is determined to a large degree by processes of political intermediation in which caciques intervene through their efforts to obtain public services to their constituents" or, arguably, to limit those services for their opponents.<sup>397</sup> Indeed, the urban cacique traditionally controls the allocation of land within a settlement and achieves the

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<sup>394</sup> *El Crisol. Órgano Mensual de la Escuela Obrera Nocturna*, August 25, 1955. AGN/ARC, 534.3/4.

<sup>395</sup> Barbosa Cano, "El colapso," 27.

<sup>396</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, Petróleos Mexicanos General Director, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

<sup>397</sup> Maldonado Aranda, "Between Law," 228.

official recognition or legalization of the settlement. The families that are allowed to access a piece of land are then indebted to the cacique, which is how he builds part of his network. Moreover, this type of arrangement can also “be employed in coercive fashion; for the land which is bestowed can easily be taken away.”<sup>398</sup> Merino managed the city’s infrastructure with a strong participation in the selling of electricity, drinking water, the ice factory, and the Bank of Tuxpan—holding 60% of the institution’s shares—the Poza Rica Hotel, radio station XEPR, and the newspaper *La Opinión*. As Fabio Barbosa Cano has observed, Merino’s “reign” coincided with the most active development of Pemex infrastructure in Poza Rica and the Mexican oil industry in general. Therefore, the superintendent’s most important sources of power and money in fact came from his participation in the urban growth of the region, for which his connections to construction companies, as well as his post in Pemex, proved invaluable.

The rapid and consistent growth of Poza Rica from 1932 well into the 1950s attracted other enterprises that catered to the needs to the industry itself, but also to the needs of oil workers. These enterprises signified great economic opportunities for a number of people, local and immigrant.<sup>399</sup> The oil wells of Poza Rica not only needed construction companies to maintain the infrastructure and equipment, but they also required transportation, housing, schools, parks, and medical services for its laborers. Merino was accused of getting a cut from all these construction activities, providing contracts without bids, “lending” Pemex workers and trucks to other businesses, and buying properties for construction of workers’ housing. In fact, he was said to own

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<sup>398</sup> Cornelius, 242.

<sup>399</sup> Ella F. Quintal Avilés, “Industria petrolera, migración y movilidad social en la zona de Poza Rica-Coatzintla, Veracruz,” B.A. Thesis, Universidad de Yucatán, 1981, 9.

several lots and buildings in Poza Rica, among which there were “properties to his name and to the name of trusted people and his family.”<sup>400</sup> Moreover, the fact that Poza Rica and its surrounding fields developed in depopulated areas where urban growth coincided with the growth of the industry also allowed Merino to become a large landowner, many times using violence to expel ejidatarios or small proprietors from plots that lay right outside the city.

The superintendent had interests in the agricultural areas near Poza Rica, enclosing territory for the construction of workers’ housing and for his own businesses. In 1953 he was accused of having Pemex workers build a fence—using Pemex materials—around his banana plantations, which were cleared with Pemex machinery and by Pemex laborers.<sup>401</sup> Also in 1953, a group that called itself “ruizcortinista” denounced “Merino and his gangsters (*esbirros*),” who tried to assassinate their ejidal leader (comisario ejidal) and control the internal politics of the town.<sup>402</sup>

In fact, Merino and the Excavations Chief of the Poza Rica Pemex branch owned in joined contract a 2000-hectare lot in Mesa de Mecatepec, whose original ejidatarios had been expelled in 1951 with great violence.<sup>403</sup> Then a group of families sent a petition to president López Mateos to denounce the Superintendent’s activities against the agrarian processes that were taking place in the area. Apparently, the town of Marco Antonio Muñoz outside Poza Rica had requested 1,400 hectares of land on the shores of

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<sup>400</sup> Frente Democrático de Unidad Sindical de Trabajadores Petroleros de la Sección 30 del STPRM, “Datos para una investigación.” N/d. AGN/Ramo Presidentes-ARC, 432/9.

<sup>401</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, Petróleos Mexicanos General Director, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

<sup>402</sup> AGN/ARC, 542.1/435.

<sup>403</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, Petróleos Mexicanos General Director, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

Cazones River through the corresponding agrarian institutions. Awaiting the authorities' decision, these families had built "humble dwellings" and had "continued toiling the soil." In 1958, however, Merino "supported by municipal and federal authorities" had pushed the families away, forcing them to abandon their crops with the goal of "disappearing the town of Marco Antonio Muñoz... making the surveyor of the Local Agrarian Commission believe that no one lived there," which eventually led the Agrarian Commission to deny the petition."<sup>404</sup>



Figure 5 – Engineer Jaime Merino (right) opening one of the drinking water valves in Papantla, Veracruz, September 16, 1955.<sup>405</sup>

<sup>404</sup> AGN/ALM, 561.1/522.

<sup>405</sup> AGN/Ramo Presidentes, ALM, 609.1/34.

The central role that Poza Rica played in the country's economy also meant that anyone who controlled the politics of the STPRM and other workers' coalitions in the area would hold the keys to the political, economic, and social stability in the center of the country. The STPRM was affiliated to the CTM, as most labor unions were, and though the national oil union gathered the majority of petroleum workers, many were against the Confederation's controlling politics and its consistent alliance with the state. Indeed, during the 1940s, the political stability and industrial development that put Mexico toward steady economic growth came at the cost of unions' autonomy and workers' empowerment. In that context, a number of unions got together to form the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos, CROC), an independent group of unions made up of workers from several trades. Very soon members of the CTM began fighting CROC sympathizers in an effort to bring them back to the government ranks.

In Poza Rica, it was Jaime Merino who was in charge of this dubious task. Since early in Merino's tenure, president Ruiz Cortines received numerous complaints by Poza Rica neighbors and CROC members stating that Merino took measures against workers who did not sympathize with the CTM, by limiting their access to public services, workers' housing, and merchants' activities.<sup>406</sup> In one letter, CROC leadership declared that Pemex management, the STPRM Executive Committee, the regional branch of the CTM, and the municipal authorities were pushing workers to re-join the CTM through

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<sup>406</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, Petróleos Mexicanos General Director, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

“coercive and selfish methods.”<sup>407</sup> In another missive written in 1953, the Union of Bread Makers and Related Industries wrote to Ruiz Cortines, accusing Jaime Merino of “pushing [workers] to abandon the ranks of [CROC] and making them join the CTM.”<sup>408</sup> A man “representing three hundred [female] restaurant workers” asked Ruiz Cortines to intervene and prevent the intimidation that CTM representatives used to push them out of CROC.<sup>409</sup> A few years later, two small merchants of Poza Rica, complained to president López Mateos that Merino had cut their water and electricity in order to pressure them into signing a collective contract under CTM directives.<sup>410</sup> Oil workers also complained that, because they were CROC members, the Superintendence of Pemex denied them “benefits to which they are entitled.”<sup>411</sup> These repressive practices were easily accomplished through Merino’s involvement in the urban growth of the municipality, which allowed him to retain or release land, building and merchant permits, and resources at will.

The oil cacique’s power, then, concentrated in controlling union posts, workers’ housing, and infrastructure for the young city’s growth, but while administering the oil industry, he was also controlling the “patrimony of the nation.” Merino’s faults were many, including fraud, election rigging, and the violent repression of his opposition; but one of his major sins, according to the population of Poza Rica, was to steal that

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<sup>407</sup> Federación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos de la Región de Álamo, Temapache, Ver. to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. Álamo, Veracruz. N/d. AGN/ARC, 432/9 (File 5).

<sup>408</sup> Sindicato de Obreros Panaderos y Trab. Conexos “Vicente Guerrero” to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Chihuahua, Chih., February 16, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

<sup>409</sup> Luis Chávez Hernández to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. Poza Rica, Veracruz. March 22, 1954. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

<sup>410</sup> AGN/ARC, 439/9.

<sup>411</sup> José Hermosillo Salas to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. Poza Rica, Veracruz. March 22, 1954. AGN/ARC, 432/9.



patrimony. Merino controlled that which lay above ground through his connections with construction and transportation businesses and he also made ample use of the “riches of the subsoil” as Pemex superintendent to advance his personal interests, “pillaging” the company’s treasury for almost ten years. As one petitioner declared in 1959: “The town of Poza Rica is thirsty for justice against undesirable functionaries, leaders of Section 30 and the municipality... the sackers of the... patrimony of the nation.”<sup>412</sup> Merino, his detractors declared, in eleven years that he served the company, “miraculously reproduced his salary as Superintendent in an industry that is patrimony of the nation... to close to EIGHTY MILLION PESOS [sic].”<sup>413</sup>

The Mexican oil industry was born together with a rhetoric that put Mexican Petroleum at the center of the postrevolutionary patrimonialist regime—one that obtained its popular support in part through the promises of land access through hacienda expropriations and economic sovereignty through the repossession of the country’s natural resources. But the measures that allowed Mexican peasants to obtain land through the agrarian reform and guaranteed workers’ rights became perverse means of control. The agrarian reform favored some above others, but most importantly, it made small peasants “beneficiaries” and government dependents.

Oil workers acquired a large debt when Cárdenas nationalized the industry to defend their rights, but saw their union independence and democracy challenged by the centralization of Mexican Petroleum. Most importantly, they saw Pemex functionaries take the patrimonialist principles to their last consequences, acting like the oil industry

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<sup>412</sup> Juan Tello González and others to Adolfo López Mateos, Poza Rica, Veracruz, August 22, 1959. AGN/ALM, 544.5/9.

<sup>413</sup> “Los Trabajadores de la Sección Num. 30, STPRM Dicen a la Opinión Pública y Secciones Hermanas: La Farsa se Repite.” N/d. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

they administered and the resources of the company in which they were employed, were somehow theirs to grab. Or, as one petitioner declared in 1960, "... J.J. Merino... [was] powerful in the region only because he was able to squander the treasure of the nation, which [he] used to end lives and satisfy [his] ambitions."<sup>414</sup> The consistent government and media rhetoric that declared the expropriation of the oil industry as an act of deep patriotism toward the protection of the national patrimony, made Merino's and others' use of Pemex coffers particularly offensive to regular citizens; especially to those whose salaries came directly from the oil industry.

The patrimonial nature of the oil industry, however, goes beyond the patriotic sentiments that it awoke among Mexicans, for it in fact affected union politics. Because the government, the CTM, and the media declared that Pemex was the property of the nation, conflicts between workers and bosses before 1938 were automatically taken as cooperation between workers and the government after, since Pemex was born as a state company. Therefore, as Alberto Olvera has established, "the union struggle within Pemex was to be understood as an attack on the nation... In this light, the workers' struggle was declared 'treason,' 'a conspiracy of the foreign companies,' and the like."<sup>415</sup> However, the patrimonialist rhetoric of the 1950s was not the same it had been during the period immediately after the expropriation of the oil industry and people's demands were different from those of the immediate postrevolution. The growth of the middle classes and the power that labor unions acquired independently of the state changed

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<sup>414</sup> Cástulo Tapia to Adolfo López Mateos. Poza Rica, Veracruz. March 22, 1960. AGN/ALM, 544.5/9.

<sup>415</sup> Olvera, "The Rise and Fall," 78.

sociopolitical power dynamics throughout the country. Poza Rica is a good example of that change.



Figure 6 – “Cacicazgo Merinovivanquista,” *El Crisol*, 1960.

Merino seems to have misestimated the increasing political consciousness and participation of those who opposed him. Such militancy reflects the myriad ways in which different groups related and interacted with Pemex and with a federal government that was also constantly accused of violating the pact of the revolution, especially after the rise and defeat of the great labor movements of the late 1950s. The groups that contributed to the fall of Merino are not only representative of local conflicts, but also reflect how the project of the postrevolution that tended to portray itself as the defender of working class and peasant interests was increasingly seen as oppressive through its interventionist politics and the power of its institutions and bureaucracy. The fall of

Merino tells us as much about the changes in the relationships between social actors in a specific locality as about larger trends in the growing political consciousness of the national arena.

### **The End of Merinismo**

Although the two decades between the governments of Lázaro Cárdenas and Adolfo López Mateos had seen frequent bouts of opposition to the monopoly of the official party—Juan Andreu Almazán, Ezquiél Padilla, and Miguel Henríquez Guzmán to name the most important—the efforts to open political representation to civil society had been mainly unsuccessful.<sup>416</sup> It was the rise of the great labor movements of the fifties—in part due to the economic recession, in part to protest PRI’s false “national unity” that neutralized political opposition—what raised serious doubts about the future of the revolutionary project. The protests and strikes led by miners in 1950-1952, students in 1955-1956, railroad and oil workers and teachers in 1957-1959 produced some results—salary raises and vague promises of union democracy in some cases—but mostly they led to detentions, disappearances, lay-offs, and violent repression toward strikers, which were the official party’s means to attain what López Mateos called an “indivisible peace.”<sup>417</sup>

Jaime Merino’s style of repression, then, was nothing peculiar compared to the strategies that PRI commonly used. Merino’s actions and eventual fall, however, do show the precarious balance on which the charro/cacique had to operate. Essentially through a mix of pan y palo, the charro had to at the same time unify and control the laboring classes. The new sociopolitical dynamics produced by the process of industrialization in

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<sup>416</sup> Semo, *El ocaso*, 37.

<sup>417</sup> *Idem.* 61.

the 1950s, however, required these brokers to deal with populations that were increasingly invested in attaining some level of representation and citizenship rights. In Poza Rica, misestimating the power of these groups proved fatal for Merino.

In the early 1950s, Pemex employed eighty percent of laborers who lived in Poza Rica and oil workers were politically divided among three groups, according to investigators from the Office of Special Affairs (Oficina de Asuntos Especiales), which was part of the Ministry of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación). The first, called “Aguacate,” consisted of old leaders of STPRM’s Section 30 and was formed by ca. 50 percent of all Pemex employees in Poza Rica. “Mosca Prieta,” the second group, was formed by 30 percent of Pemex workers, who had in fact never been union militants until then. The remaining 20 percent did not belong to a specific organization and remained politically neutral.

According to the Oficina agents, the situation in Poza Rica was of “extremely dangerous agitation,” since “administrative authorities” of the local Pemex branch, led by Jaime Merino and the Chief of Personnel Carlos Flores, as well as the municipal president, the Police Chief, and the local military commander supported Mosca Prieta.<sup>418</sup> At stake in these fights was mainly the administration the union, which included the workers’ cooperative, the film commission, the administration of the “Poza Rica” market, and the “selling of permanent posts within the company... And posts that carry large earnings.”<sup>419</sup> The political, as well as the economic consequences of these struggles were

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<sup>418</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, Petróleos Mexicanos General Director, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

<sup>419</sup> *Idem.*

important for large portions of Poza Rica's population because so many people were employed by the company and belonged to the STPRM.

Since Aguacate began putting pressure on union politics, Merino allegedly ordered the detention of Aguacate leader Luis Cárdenas, preventing him from running and winning the internal election of STPRM's section 30. Cárdenas was picked up and taken to jail in Jalapa, where he remained incommunicado for over a week. After the elections he was let go, with no clarification for the detention.<sup>420</sup> Additionally, during the election, Merino made sure that Cárdenas's people did not have access to the union assembly attended by the Secretary General to the National Executive Committee where the votes were to be cast. The superintendent brought neighbors from the nearby towns and ranches to fill the venue. Apparently, none of the individuals brought in were oil workers, for "most of workers favore[d] Cárdenas, which is why they [did] not let them participate in the assemblies."<sup>421</sup> Merino's closest ally, Manuel Salas Castelán, won those elections and became Section 30's Union Secretary.

After Salas Castelán began his tenure as Secretary, a check for \$10,000 authorized by Merino was taken out of the Pemex office. The check would supposedly cover some union fees, which never reached the destined parties, but did allegedly get to the new Union Secretary's pocket. A group of workers found out about this check and published an open letter to President Ruiz Cortines in *El Universal* and other publications to denounce Merino's "gangster activities." Those workers, it was later discovered, were

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<sup>420</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>421</sup> Memorandum from the Procuraduría General de la República, Mexico City, April 13, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

immediately fired from their posts in Pemex.<sup>422</sup> Luis Cárdenas, then, began organizing “secret assemblies” with the discharged men to form the Democratic Unified Bloc of Section 30 Oil Workers (Bloque Democrático de Unidad Sindical de Trabajadores Petroleros de la Sección 30).<sup>423</sup>

Two years later, twelve oil laborers who were militants of the group “Los Goyos”—or “Gregorio L. González,” named after an oil worker from Acapulco who led the efforts to unionize in Poza Rica during the 1930s—denounced Merino’s administration in *Excélsior*.<sup>424</sup> They listed, for President Ruiz Cortines, the Secretaries of Labor, Interior, Economy, and Defense, the many instances of corruption that the Superintendent supposedly engaged in himself or covered. Most were the allegations mentioned throughout this chapter.

The twelve workers were fired from the company and Merino and his supporters started an active campaign to refute these accusations. For example, members of one Group for the Moral, Civic, and Material Betterment of Poza Rica sent a letter to Ruiz Cortines expressing their deep “indignation for the cowardly accusations... against progressive men Misters Antonio J. Bermúdez, Jaime Merino... and Pedro Vivanco, who have made efforts in benefit of this city, which is the pride of Veracruz.”<sup>425</sup> Many other groups sent similar letters.<sup>426</sup> Other people, however, expressed their solidarity to the oil

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<sup>422</sup> *El Universal*, Carta Abierta, December 31, 1952. Also, Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

<sup>423</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC, 432/9 (File 5).

<sup>424</sup> *Excélsior*, May 12, 1954. Quintal, “La sección 30,” 308.

<sup>425</sup> Cirenio M. Coronado to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. Poza Rica Veracruz, May 12, 1954. AGN/ARC, 432/9 (File 5).

<sup>426</sup> Among them was the Patronato Pro-Servicio Eléctrico de la Colonia Manuel Ávila Camacho; the Cámara de Nacional de Comercio de Poza Rica; the Unión de Resistencia

workers and declared that municipal authorities were putting pressure on some to “make declarations that are contrary to what is being denounced.”<sup>427</sup> In 1958, Goyos leaders again made accusations in the *Diario de Xalapa*, that Merino’s fortune was in excess of one thousand million pesos and concluded that Poza Rica “is Merino’s feud. He does not know any other authority but his own.”<sup>428</sup>

Though Merino’s opposing groups had small chances because of the strong economic links and commitments that many people and companies had formed with the superintendent throughout the 1950s, the constant inter-union struggles in Poza Rica, the growth of the CROC network, and the formation of social coalitions that consistently exposed Merino’s practices, put him in a difficult position in the latter part of the decade. The existence of these groups also shows the new type of political participation that grew through the 1950s.

In 1958, the superintendent’s main ally, Pedro Vivanco, resigned the municipal presidency to occupy the general leadership of Section 30. Dissident workers understood that it was a crucial moment to try to open the electoral process of the municipality to more democratic practices. Organizers rallied ca. 5000 people grouped in different organizations—Goyos and Aguacate among others—and created the Democratic Party of Poza Rica (Partido Demócrata Pozarricense, PDP) with Francisco Villa Rentería—incidentally the only recognized son of Pancho Villa—as Party’s president and Fausto Dávila Solís as candidate for the municipal presidency.

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Locatarios Mercados de Poza Rica; the Sociedad de Alumnos Misión Cultural; and workers from the local CTM. See AGN/ARC, 432/9 (File 5).

<sup>427</sup> Manuel Ramos Carvallo and others to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. Poza Rica, Veracruz. May 14, 1954. AGN/ARC, 432/9 (File 6).

<sup>428</sup> Barbosa Cano, “El colapso,” 27.



According to Fabio Barbosa Cano, this is when the opposition grew to become a real threat to Merino and his cadre. The local PRI became fragmented and the movement attracted members of CROC, CTM, and of the PDP. However, PDP's leaders began to immediately feel the pressure. Villa Rentería and Dávila Solís were constantly arrested and detained, accused of "sedition" and "disobedience." Villa Rentería spent one year in prison.<sup>429</sup> Hundreds of petitions arrived to the office of presidents Adolfo Ruiz Cortines and later to Adolfo López Mateos, denouncing the detention of these men and Merino's "terrorist politics."<sup>430</sup> In turn, Merino attended the local PRI convention and declared that members of the opposition were "communists... trying to sabotage the refinery." Of Aguacate leaders Merino said that they espoused, "Ideologies that are in complete opposition to the current regime" and engaged in "social dissolution."<sup>431</sup>

Members of the PDP, Los Goyos, and others celebrated Fausto Dávila's supposed triumph on October 5, denouncing Merino's actions to rig the elections—he had his cadre police the streets and "inflate" voting booths with ballots that favored his own candidate. The following day, when Salas Castelán's victory was announced through the radio, ten thousand people took the streets to peacefully protest the imposition. Demonstrators walked, unmolested, toward the center of Poza Rica. When they reached the city's downtown area, a group of armed men opened fire against them, killing, official reports claimed, seven people and wounding several others. True figures are unknown, but local historians contend that casualties were much higher.

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<sup>429</sup> Barbosa Cano, 29.

<sup>430</sup> Various petitions, AGN/ALM, 544.5/9.

<sup>431</sup> Report to Antonio J. Bermúdez, Petróleos Mexicanos General Director, February 9, 1953. AGN/ARC-432/9.

After the massacre, Merino and Salas Castelán threw Villa Rentería and others back in jail, resulting in hundreds of protests that reached López Mateos. Neighbors, members of the CROC, teachers, and oil workers asked the president to liberate those who were “in jail in Tuxpan, Veracruz because,” as a supporter of the opposition stated, “they have fought for the respect of our laws and the rights that, as humans, assist us.” This supporter also asked the president to “... prevent that people who are known assassins occupy security posts... despite popular repudiation, given that [these] individual[s] participated in the October 6 massacre.”<sup>432</sup>

Things started going downhill for Merino after October 6. He had been famous for getting along with president Ruiz Cortines and his Pemex director Enrique Bermúdez. Not so with López Mateos. During the candidate’s tour through Veracruz in early 1958, Merino supposedly received him with a throng of people dressed in green, red, and white (the colors of the Mexican flag) who cheered at the exact moment when Merino signaled them to. “Pure cacique style,” considered López Mateos’s campaign manager.<sup>433</sup> The superintendent then guided his visitors to a nearby theater for an event put together by Merino himself where he and Pedro Vivanco were “honored by the people of Poza Rica,” undoubtedly putting the presidential candidate in an awkward position. Merino is also said to have called López Mateos by his first name, foregoing the strict ceremoniousness that characterized such events. It was even rumored that in their youth Merino and López

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<sup>432</sup> Josefa de la Luz de F. to Adolfo López Mateos, Poza Rica, Veracruz. July 15, 1959. AGN/ALM, 544.5/9(10)-544.5/10.

<sup>433</sup> Leonardo Zaleta, *Personajes de Poza Rica II* (Xalapa, Méx: n/e, 2012), 103.

Mateos had shared a love interest, which in theory caused López Mateos's early lack of sympathy for the superintendent.<sup>434</sup>

Merino was deposed from his post in Pemex in July of 1959 and substituted by members of his opposing group—an action that was celebrated by numerous Poza Ricans, who wrote letters declaring, “the expulsion of Jaime Merino from Pemex consolidates the prestige of [López Mateos's] regime. Poza Rica and the entire country applaud the protection of the national interests.”<sup>435</sup> Merino's ally, Pedro Vivanco, was allegedly booed at all Section 30 assemblies and opposing factions consistently challenged Salas Castelán's municipal government. One vecino wrote to López Mateos that the municipal president “was not chosen by the people of Poza Rica [and is] an imposed ruler that governs over dead bodies because, to reach his post, he had to kill innocent people.”<sup>436</sup> This set of events, plus the thousands of petitions that the people of Poza Rica wrote against the superintendent led López Mateos to depose Merino from his post in Pemex in July of 1959. Poza Ricans wrote letters declaring, “Poza Rica and the entire country applaud [López Mateos's] actions to protect of the national interests.”<sup>437</sup>

After Merino's fall, his allies also faced legal consequences. Salas Castelán was separated from his position and the new municipal council audited numerous governmental entities in the city, resolving “that Mr. Salas Castelán had taken for his own use several amounts of money, which added to ONE MILLION PESOS [sic], distracting

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<sup>434</sup> *Idem*, 69.

<sup>435</sup> Profs. Guillermo Olivares Bustos and María Ana Peña de Olivares. Poza Rica, Veracruz. August 13, 1959. AGN/ALM, 703.4/23.

<sup>436</sup> Francisca Baños Neri to Adolfo López Mateos. Poza Rica, Veracruz. August 9, 1959. AGN/ALM, 544.5/9(10)-544.5/10.

<sup>437</sup> Professors Guillermo Olivares Bustos and María Ana Peña de Olivares. Poza Rica, Veracruz. August 13, 1959. AGN/ALM, 703.4/23.

him from his essential objective, the fulfillment and execution of works to benefit society in Poza Rica.”<sup>438</sup> Several well known individuals in Poza Rica’s public life denounced Salas Castelán’s activities, like the director of the newspaper *El Porvenir*, who asked for the intervention of president López Mateos “to respond to the accusation presented before the Procuraduría General de la República and of State Justice against Mr. Manuel Salas Castelán... for the embezzlement of public funds”<sup>439</sup>

Before Pemex officially announced Merino’s ousting, the superintendent was sent to California on company’s business. He remained there until December 1959, when accusations of fraud and embezzlement started arising against him in Poza Rica, at which point he was officially deposed. He had allegedly taken several million pesos from Pemex’s treasury, aside from the fraudulent practices in which he had engaged from his post as superintendent for almost twenty years. In 1961, *Excélsior* announced that it was “a matter of days” until Merino was extradited from the United States, since “U.S. authorities refused to have courts in Los Angeles, California, hear Merino’s case.”<sup>440</sup> While Merino was being tried in California, vecinos from Poza Rica—among them Los Goyos—wrote to President López Mateos “applauding [the president’s] firm determination to punish those responsible for the sacking of the oil industry... [and wish] that all the rigor of the law be applied to the bad Mexicans who committed treason

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<sup>438</sup> Alberto Rodríguez Prieto to Adolfo López Mateos, Poza Rica, Veracruz, December 8, 1960. AGN/ALM, 544.5/9(10)-544.5/10.

<sup>439</sup> Alberto Rodríguez Prieto to Adolfo López Mateos, Poza Rica, Veracruz, December 26, 1960. AGN/ALM, 544.5/9.

<sup>440</sup> “Muy pronto será extraditado Jaime Merino, dice el Procurador General,” *Excélsior*, Thursday, May 11, 1961.

against the country for many years.”<sup>441</sup> Merino stayed in California until his death in 1980.

A journalist from *Revista Proceso* interviewed the former superintendent in 1979 and described him as “nervous, stuttering... anxious to finish the interview, but still remembering ‘his’ Poza Rica.”<sup>442</sup> When asked if he had truly been an oil cacique, like his detractors argued, Merino responded:

Well, people say that there are good caciques and bad caciques. The truth is, I always did what I thought I had to do. Most probably what I wanted to do was precisely what Poza Rica needed. So, if any problem arose, I would gather union and labor leaders and confronted the problem head on, managing to build hospitals, sports fields, a high school, a road, whatever was needed. So, in that sense I was a cacique, if you will, but a good one for sure.<sup>443</sup>

During the days when his extradition was being discussed between the Mexican and US governments, president López Mateos declared that he would allow “neither thieves nor ‘Merinos’” and the superintendent’s name became synonym of the type of corruption within Pemex that, in theory, would not be tolerated by the new regime. Merino’s name, however, did not make it into the pantheon of union corruption in Mexico, perhaps because other—arguably worse—oil caciques and labor charros succeeded him. His story is well worth telling nonetheless. Merino’s was “strange case of caciquismo,” since the control he held over Poza Rica’s politics, labor activism, and public services came from someone who was “neither an oil leader, nor a militant politician... but by the top local representative of Pemex”.<sup>444</sup> In short, Merino embodied

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<sup>441</sup> Isaac Ortega Lara to Adolfo López Mateos. Poza Rica, Veracruz. February 13, 1960. AGN/ALM, 703.4/23.

<sup>442</sup> Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti, “‘Fui un cacique bueno’ dice Jaime Merino,” *Revista Proceso*, 1979, 12-13.

<sup>443</sup> *Idem*, 14.

<sup>444</sup> Octavio Aguilar de la Parra, *Mi tío el cacique. Ensayo político anecdótico* (México:

the country's transition to the type of modernity that came with economic sovereignty and growth, urban and demographic expansion, and most importantly with the entrance of the middle classes into the Mexico's political arena.

### **Conclusion**

By the time Merino reached the zenith of his power in Poza Rica, Section 30 of the STPRM was one of the most powerful in the country. But this was also the period when some of the most intense labor disputes took place throughout the country. In 1958, railroad workers led massive mobilizations and celebrated the arrival of Demetrio Vallejo to the leadership of the National Railroad Workers' Union (Sindicado de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la República Mexicana, STFRM). Teachers, telegraph operators, tram workers, and other laborers also mobilized. Caciques in other regions were falling through popular pressure, like Gonzalo N. Santos in San Luis Potosí and Leobardo Reynoso in Zacatecas.<sup>445</sup> Internal politics of the STRPM were also putting pressure on different Pemex charros. The changes in the company that would conclude with its vertical integration in 1959 put great pressure on the Union. In Poza Rica, workers who were discontent with the monopoly of power held by leaders of Section 30 formed new coalitions.

Merino had powerful connections within the local PRI leadership and the party itself had played an important role in the consolidation of Merino's power in Poza Rica. Something similar occurred in other regions, producing a general pattern in which "... political power under PRI dominance actually fortified some cacicazgos by embedding

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Corporación Editorial, 1985) 91.

<sup>445</sup> Barbosa Cano, 28.

local power brokers in a political machine with national reach, simultaneously expanding caciques' access to patronage resources while making them less dependent of the support of their followers."<sup>446</sup> As we see, Jaime Merino fit all the descriptions of the cacique despite the fact that his was a short cacicazgo compared to that of others such as Fidel Velázquez—leader of the CTM for over sixty years—or La Quina, who controlled the STPRM and the local politics of southern Tamaulipas from 1958 to 1989. Merino's case shows the social, political, and economic changes that went hand in hand with the growth of the oil industry in Mexico, but most importantly with the urban growth of Poza Rica.

It is now undeniable that for a cacicazgo to exist and remain “successful” it has to become integrated to the prevalent economic system—in the case of Poza Rica, to the production of petroleum. The new cacicazgo must also be able to provide incentives to communities that started to become increasingly communicated and preoccupied with national politics in the 1950s and 60s, at the same time that they demanded a participation in the political process through the development of a consciousness regarding their citizenship rights, civic responsibilities, working-class identity, and a new entitlement they felt as a nascent middle classes. The social coalitions that arose to defeat Merino's cacicazgo are proof of the new sense of social justice that the caciques often faced.

In the system of corporations advanced by the PRM and PRI, government-approved labor unions and confederations proved fundamental to achieve the level of control and social peace that the regime desired. The specific people who were able to administer these organizations, then, acquired unprecedented power as brokers of the government on different levels. In a place like Poza Rica, where there was real

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<sup>446</sup> Middlebrook, 415.

confluence of the rural and urban worlds the urban cacique and labor charro proved invaluable to administer and keep an a population that showed increasing political engagement in check. Jaime Merino was that cacique/charro during the most important decade of urban growth, industrialization, and oil production in the country. The transition from agriculture and industrialization that had occupied posrevolutionary governments since Cárdenas, became a reality during the 1950s and, in the specific case of Poza Rica, was embodied in Jaime Merino.



## Conclusions

The struggles over property explained here played a pivotal role in the development of a notion of national property in Mexico. The constitution of 1917 established, through Article 27, that all property was national property. For many, this precept meant that Mexican citizens had the right to obtain a piece of that national property for their subsistence, especially in areas where foreigners controlled the land. These struggles also reveal the process through which national property became national patrimony and a synonym of the justice of the revolution. The state as the administrator of all territory ensured, in theory, that every citizen would obtain his or her share of the land.

The study of postrevolutionary laws and property reforms reveals the close relationship between the “agrarian problem” and the modernization effort of the Mexican postrevolutionary state. Although property ownership and citizenship had been deeply intertwined since the postindependence period, never before the revolution had so many individuals, families, and communities at their disposal the many legal channels and institutions that facilitated access to land. These same families and individuals, however, also faced and suffered a convoluted bureaucratic system and the slow process of obtaining a grant. Some communities waited for decades before having access to their plots and some found themselves in the middle of political squabbles between local and federal authorities. As the cases I presented here show, the process of land distribution through the agrarian reform was complicated even further by the exploitation of petroleum.

The nationalization of the oil industry, as was explained, forms part of the political agenda that put property and property relations in the forefront of the postrevolutionary social contract. The constitution of 1917 had established the national ownership of subsoil resources and the regulatory practices of the federal government in the creation of private and communal property. The article also established that it was the government's right and responsibility to dismantle large landownership and create small plots for ejidatarios. For that purpose, the regime enacted a massive agrarian reform of which small peasants became main beneficiaries. Workers benefitted from the labor laws that emanated from Article 123 and from the industrial growth that the nationalization of strategic industries produced. The creation of Pemex and other state companies ensured that the industrialization project was off to a good start and that the proletariat remained employed and treated with dignity. Basically, these measures provided a common goal for all Mexicans: economic independence, political sovereignty in the international arena, and internal social stability.

Article 27 was also intended to define the participation that foreigners would have in the economic life of the country. As explained here, the constitution establishes that various limitations to foreign landownership in Mexico and prohibits the exploitation of the country's subsoil resources by foreign enterprises. The first paragraph of article 27 establishes the general principle that all lands and waters within the national territory are original property of the nation. The following paragraphs specify that water and minerals are inalienable and imprescriptible. The nation, then, maintains the direct control of these substances at all times and can only surrender their exploitation through concessions.

This system of concession contravenes the legislative changes during Porfiriato that allowed foreign companies to exploit large areas of land for the production of oil.

In some regions of Veracruz, workers' struggles for property rights, as well as the way of life they shared with their families, were permeated by the exploitation of petroleum, first by foreign companies and after 1938 by a monopolistic national industry under government control. My study of this relationship between oil production and property holding revealed that oil workers' defense of their right to own land was informed by a particular notion of what "national property" meant in the context of the development of the industry before and after 1938. It also leaves clear that despite the fact that oil expropriation represented revolutionary justice for most Mexicans, it did not necessarily change workers' and their families' living conditions or their access to land. In other words, oil expropriation translated into national justice by returning a strategic resource to Mexican hands. It did not, however, represent local justice, as the property rights for which those in the oil communities had struggled went from foreign control to the jurisdiction of Pemex.

During the 1930s, the official party strove to change the organization of Mexican society. As shown here, this modification included the conceptions of property and citizenship, which were very much based on the corporatist program of Cardenistas. The questions that this dissertation attempted to respond were guided by the experiences of individuals who lived part or all their lives near the oil fields; the peasants from whose lands oil was extracted and the communities that requested lands in those areas; the laborers who were employed in the exploitation of the resource and who many times

demanded land as well. The individuals, in sum, who were situated in the gray area produced by agriculture and oil production.

In the course of this dissertation, I have come to the conclusion that these “transitory” workers did their best to understand the links between the law, the official rhetoric, traditional and new notions of property rights, and the reality they experienced day by day. Such understanding led the relationship they established with an official party, its institutions, and bureaucracy that pushed them to identify themselves through their set role—or sector—within this apparatus. People living in these oil communities, however, were also able to employ the discourse about national property and national patrimony to their advantage, taking from it what best suited their reality at different moments. In short, oil workers and peasants were as much as they could participants in the redefinition of property regimes and property rights in the postrevolution. Moreover, they were instrumental figures in the building of the patrimonialist rhetoric that has accompanied governments since the revolution, especially after the creation of the PRM.

In her study of Cardenista cultural projects in Michoacán, Marjorie Becker has uncovered the many ways in which towns and communities resisted the uniformizing and secularizing efforts pushed by Cárdenas during his period as governor of the state as well as from his presidency. Becker has studied the distinct ethnic, political, and religious characteristics of michoacanos to argue that the Cardenista project was not as successful in unifying the country as is traditionally believed. In a similar vein, Ben Fallaw has studied land reform in Yucatán, arguing that this area was for Cárdenas “the perfect place to forge a new Mexico” because of its social component (a small number of white families and a large Maya-speaking population), which allowed the Cardenistas to

mobilize a large social base along class and ethnic lines. Fallaw's work, as Becker's, relies on the very specific elements that characterized their respective states historically, basing their analyses on populations that had been in those areas since the pre-Conquest period.<sup>447</sup>

In contrast, the study of Veracruz cannot rely on such characteristics. On the one hand, Veracruz was home to few indigenous groups, compared to those in Michoacán, Yucatán, or several other states in central and southern Mexico. On the other, Veracruz became home of enormous immigrant populations since the late nineteenth century in large part due to the industrial growth of the state. Therefore, the failure of the national project in Veracruz, at least in its peripheries, had less to do with the population's link to and defense of their so-called *patria chica* than with their desire to be active participants and defenders of their *patria grande* against the ruthless hands of the foreign oil companies and of disloyal Pemex leaders, as well as protectors of their own right to partake in the national patrimony. Several elements contribute to this idea: on the one hand were myriad regional customs coincided in the oil areas of Veracruz; on the other, the nationalistic rhetoric surrounding oil production, which was prevalent in these regions, shaped the ways in which people asked for land and justice. In short, the postrevolutionary national project was successful in shaping a particular viewpoint regarding land possession in Veracruz, but it was a failure in its attempts at imposing a series of ideal types of property ownership and political participation over a population as varied and complex as the one in the oil communities.

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<sup>447</sup> Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*; Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised*.

The postrevolutionary regime developed institutions and laws, among them expropriation and agrarian laws, that served to control the way that different groups engaged with the government and understood their citizenship rights. Much of this control came from the administration of the property of the nation—making it available or unavailable according to the needs of the government, more than the needs of the people. The institutions developed in turn served to de-radicalize groups that could have posed serious threats to the local and federal governments. As shown in Chapter 3, one of the consequences of the oil expropriation of 1938 was the control of oil properties by making them federal property, taking them “off the market” for land petitioners and radical groups. In the case of oil workers, as is shown here, the conditions under which the National Oil Workers’ Union was created—most specifically the implicit pact that came with Lázaro Cárdenas’s support to the unionization of oil laborers and the nationalization of the industry—and the centralized administration of workers’ political participation, marked the interventionist politics that would reach their zenith in the 1950s. The system of sectors developed by the PRM and the PRI guaranteed a corporatist organization that allowed the federal government to better control the different groups.

Though I see the struggles that these actors spearheaded to defend their rights against foreign oil companies and the state, then just against the state, as very conscious decisions to do so—in short, not merely as reaction to a perceived attack—I also understand that they did not have much of a choice but to engage with the state through the official Party’s own rhetoric. It is true, as postrevisionist historians have shown, that the “central” state built by the Cardenistas especially was consistently challenged and reshaped depending on the political and social circumstances in different regions. In short,

that it was less of a leviathan than it had traditionally been conceived. However, it is also true that the “collective” structure built by Cardenas, where individual citizens were pushed into a game of belonging by having to adhere to the government’s sectors, was felt with great strength in some areas, such as the oil communities of Veracruz. Indeed, Cardenas had not even left the presidency before the effects of that phenomenon were felt in full force. The organizations that “represented” industrial workers and peasants became instruments of power for Cárdenas’s successor Manuel Ávila Camacho’s more conservative regime. This fact transformed union and confederation leaders in power brokers as well. The extreme of this transformation became a caricature of what union representation and workers’ political power could be. Jaime Merino, for example, was the embodiment of that caricature.

In a ceremony held in 1958 to name Merino “Poza Rica’s Worker Number One,”—for which he took laborers’ half day’s salary to pay for the lavish celebration that accompanied the act—the superintendent’s speech included a bold “l’etat c’est moi.”<sup>448</sup> If we consider that, from his post in Pemex, Merino was able to control regional politics and labor conflicts, dominating all economic activities and getting a cut from all major businesses that went on in Poza Rica, perhaps it is true that, in the peculiar world of the oil city, Merino had absolute control of the state; that in fact he embodied it, like Louis XIV himself. Indeed, he had become the physical representation of the traditional cacique, the power broker, the opportunist politician, the criminal, and the bureaucrat. Overall, he had become the loyal militant of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional.

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<sup>448</sup> “Los Trabajadores de la Sección Num. 30, STPRM Dicen a la Opinión Pública y Secciones Hermanas: La Farsa se Repite.” N/d. AGN/ARC, 432/9.

His fall seemed to have served as warning to other labor charros to not disregard the new political force that was born out of the height of Mexico's economic power in the 1950s. Mexican society was again being reordered during this period, as it had been during the 1930s. This time, however, under a pretense of "absolute unification" within the Pax Priista. My work, as other post-1940 literatures do, showed that such supposed peace came at the expense of union democracy and an autonomous peasantry. This fact, however, did not and has not stopped dissident groups from continuing to fight against this central power that overlooks each region's so-called "idiosyncrasies." In a moment when the "party of the revolution" is back in power and sweeping institutional reforms are taking place in Mexico, it is the recognition of such local needs—such as the ones experienced by individuals in the present-day oil communities—that will perhaps allow Mexico to attain a level of peace and economic sovereignty.



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