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978-0-521-08568-7 - Mexican Agriculture 1521-1630: Transformation of the Mode of Production

Andre Gunder Frank

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## Preface

The research reflected in the following pages was undertaken in 1965, while I was Professor at the National School of Economics at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and Research Associate in its Institute of Economic Research. It was written up in 1966 when I was serving as Professor in the Departments of Economics and History at Sir George Williams University in Montreal, Canada. Apart from a few minor changes, including the addition of a list of references, the manuscript has remained unrevised, and is published as such due to the following circumstances and reasons.

At the time the research was undertaken, a simple collection and ordering of the most salient facts seemed to be a useful task in the absence of any single history of Mexican agriculture. What is more, it seemed important to confront the theoretical and ideological challenges of a time in which the thesis of 'feudalism', especially in agriculture, was still dominant in Latin America (and its political implications were widespread, see Frank 1967 and Frank 1969). The standard historical works on agriculture in Mexico, like those of Jesús Silva Herzog, dealt with 'agrarianismo' or agricultural policy, and did not offer an analysis of the history of agrarian reality. The only study available on this topic was the *Economía y política en la historia de México* by Manuel López Gallo, which had just been published and was soon reprinted, and was in all respects unsatisfactory. At the same time there appeared the politically important *Democracia en México* by Pablo González Casanova which, apart from other objectionable features (see Frank 1969: chapter 20), used a faulty analysis of Mexico's past as its 'scientific' basis.

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My own study of Mexican agriculture was intended to help fill this then existing scientific void and thereby to intervene in the political debate of the time. (Since then vast scientific advances have been made by others and the terms of the political debate have changed as well.)

The review, analysis and interpretation of the transformation and development of the modes of agricultural production in Mexico during the first century after the Spanish conquest, which is now published here, was originally intended as the first part of a study entitled 'Mexican agriculture from conquest to Revolution: an economic historical interpretation'. The following extract from the original description of this research project (dated 16 December 1965) will give an idea of the scope of the project as a whole, of the context in which this text should be seen, and of the hypothesis on which the work is based.

I propose to collect and analyse data about the state and development of Mexican agriculture over four centuries from the conquest to 1910, and I hope to contribute to the greater clarification of these fundamental problems: the transformation brought about by conquest and colonization in the sixteenth century and then again during the 'seventeenth' century of depression; the causes of the development of the *hacienda* and its economic function; the agricultural background of Independence; the causes and consequences of the *manos muertas* of Church property; the economic currents that led to the Reform and the economic interests at stake; the relations between agriculture and the Porfirian Peace; the nature of the Mexican Revolution; and certain analogies between the causes and consequences of Independence, Reform and Revolution as well as agrarian reform, and between these and similar events in other parts of Latin America.

I hope to achieve the following goals: first, to assemble data about four centuries of agricultural reality, rather than (the more usually discussed) 'agrarianism' or agrarian policy and reform. This work should facilitate access of other researchers to such data which are still widely dispersed among many sources. Second, I hope to find and expose the thread of historical development which passes through these realities of Mexican agriculture and which relates them to world and national development. Thereby, I also hope to contribute to the study and understanding of Mexican and Latin American past and present in general.

Finally, I hope to test the facts and offer a different interpretation of some widely accepted theses, for example:

(1) The thesis of Chevalier and Borah that the Mexican *hacienda* 'consolidated' itself in the 'century of depression' in which agriculture 'involved' is, I suggest, disproved by their own and other researchers' data. I propose to test the opposite hypothesis that 'the formation of the great latifundium in Mexico' (as well as in other Latin American countries) was due to an

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increase in the market demand and price for its products, not only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (mining and urban demand), but also in the eighteenth century (mining and free trade demand), in the nineteenth century (economic development), and again in the twentieth century (foreign and industrial demand).

(2) The thesis of subsistence agriculture in a closed economy can be confronted by facts that suggest a little appreciated but very appreciable level of commercialization of agriculture, of the farmer, and of the (indigenous) peasant, all of which seem to respond to and adapt themselves to economic cycles of regional, national and international demand and supply throughout Mexican history. I wish to show that it is this base of economic change and development, more than the so-called archaic institutions and the legislative reforms, that constitutes the principal determinant of the economic and cultural wealth and poverty of the Mexican people. At the same time, I wish to test against the historical facts the doubtful thesis that an increase in demand and development necessarily brings with it a general increase in wealth and welfare, and the contrary hypothesis that very often demand and development generate a greater degree of misery for a large part of the peasant class.

(3) The thesis that the land in New Spain belonged to and suffered because of the *manos muertas* of the Church does not stand up to historical evidence. The Church was in possession of the land from the time of Independence. I propose to locate and explain this occurrence within the agricultural and economic decline of the times and to analyse its economic significance.

(4) It is customary to interpret the Reform in terms of liberalism and individualism, but I propose to examine it within its economic context and with reference to the improvement and increase of agricultural business as part of the general economic upswing. These were, I suggest, more the cause of this Reform than its consequence. I suggest that reform appeared in various Latin American countries at different times because the necessary economic circumstances appeared at different times. [This hypothesis has since been partially examined and confirmed in Frank 1972: chapter 5.] Examination of the circumstances surrounding the Reform will permit a better appreciation of its economic and social consequences.

(5) I propose to examine these and other problems with the most readily available historical material from the Porfiriato, in which many old problems reappear in a new context, which renders them sufficiently acute to lead to the Revolution.

I hope that this study will lead to the concrete support of my hypotheses, and that an interpretation of the Independence, Reform, Revolution and agrarian reform will emerge out of the study of the economic reality of the social system and the historical development which produced these major national movements in Mexico, and others elsewhere in Latin America. Perhaps the study will thus contribute to the better comprehension of the successes that these social movements had or failed to have in Mexico and to a better appreciation of the success that analogous movements could have elsewhere in Latin America.

Finally and most importantly, I hope that the assembly of these data and the proposition of these and other hypotheses will help and encourage other researchers who are better able to pursue the directions outlined here.



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Other responsibilities and undertakings unfortunately prevented me from pursuing and completing this study of Mexican agriculture from conquest to Revolution as intended. I was able to prepare a written text of my analysis of only the first century after the conquest, and it is this text which is now published as the present book. My never written analysis of the historical evidence for later periods does, however, support the foregoing hypotheses as follows. The first attempt at Mexican independence under the leadership of Hidalgo and Morelos was in part a response to the increased exploitation of labour which resulted from the accelerated growth of agricultural and mining production (stimulated by the increase and liberalization of foreign trade at the end of the eighteenth century). The greater weight of *manos muertas* and the lower efficiency of land use after Independence were due primarily to the general economic and agricultural 'depression' of the time. The liberal reform of the mid nineteenth century was caused by economic revival, which it then promoted further. The organization and development of agricultural production during the Porfiriato obeyed challenges and opportunities generated by imperialism (and not inherited from feudalism), causing a crisis so acute as to produce the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which was sparked off by the American recession of 1907.

Beyond the projected study of agriculture in Mexico, I had intended to apply the economic analysis implicit in the above hypotheses to the comparative study of the growth and development of the latifundium elsewhere in Latin America. Accordingly, my research seminar in the sociology department of the Universidad de Chile began the analysis, comparison and interpretation of the growth and development of the latifundium in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Chile, in nineteenth-century Argentina, Cuba and São Paulo, and in other areas insofar as the available literature permitted. The intention was to use these studies to analyse varieties, appearance and *essence* of organizational forms, mode of production and their transformation in contemporary agriculture in Chile and Mexico. Some preliminary aspects of the line of study are published in Frank 1972: chapters 2 and 5 (on agrarian structure and liberal reforms respectively).

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The study of Mexican agriculture now published here is limited to a much shorter historical period and a narrower topical range than the study outlined above. Nonetheless, the analysis in the text as published here is strongly influenced – indeed substantially determined – by the theoretical scope of the unfinished larger study. At the same time, I hope that the theoretical scope of this short text may still prove useful – if not determinant – for the analysis of the longer period and wider range of problems posed by Mexican and Latin American agricultural development to our day. On the other hand, the recent very substantial advance of work on Mexican agricultural history by other researchers has advanced far beyond my own capacities. Therefore, my own continuation of this study would now be out of place; and even the revision of the present manuscript to take account of these advances would be out of the question. Moreover, under present circumstances the study of urban, industrial and international political economic forces and developments on a world scale assume greater urgency and importance for me than further research into Mexican agrarian problems.

Therefore, I face the alternatives of leaving my existing manuscript to rest forever in my files or of publishing it as it is. Three main considerations induce me to now publish my text as this book. Firstly, its use and citation by Alonso Aguilar in his *Dialéctica de la economía mexicana* suggests that some other students of these and related problems may still derive some benefit from the work that went into the preparation of this manuscript. Secondly, there is a renewed interest in the history of colonial times and in the analysis or reinterpretation of modes of production then and since then. This interest is reflected in the success of books like Stanley and Barbara Stein's *Colonial Heritage of Latin America*; in the publication of historical studies of Mexico and elsewhere in the Latin American Series by Cambridge University Press; in the excellent new economic historical research by many Mexican authors, including especially Enrique Florescano and other historians at the Colegio de México; and in general the lively debate on the reinterpretation of dependence through the analysis of modes of

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production in Latin America and other parts of the world, which rages through the journals there and elsewhere. All this literature is becoming so abundant as to render its citation here impossible. In this context, the present book may constitute an additional grain of sand. Thirdly, in much of this literature, I am criticized for having devoted excessive attention in my publications to the relations of exchange and thereby supposedly excluding the relations of production. Without wishing to accept or answer these charges here, I would like to make available to my critics and other readers an analysis of some aspects of agriculture which, though written long ago, perhaps dedicates relatively more attention to the relations of production, and which tries to account for and explain them, though possibly still not to the satisfaction of my critics and certainly not to my own.

*Santiago de Chile, 1972*  
*Frankfurt, 1978*

A.G.F.

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## Acknowledgements and dedication

I wish to extend my thanks to many friends and institutions for the help and support which made it possible for this work finally to see the light of day more than a decade after its preparation: to the National School of Economics (then under the direction of Horacio Flores de la Peña) and the Institute of Economics Research (whose Director at the time was José Luis Ceceña) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and especially the *compañeros* Alonso Aguilar, Arturo Bonilla and Fernando Carmona for their support while I was doing the research on Mexican agriculture which underlies this essay (as well as that on later periods which I was never able to write up); to the Louis M. Rabinowitz Foundation of New York for financial support at that time; to the secretaries at the Department of Economics of Sir George Williams University in Montreal, Canada, who in 1966 took great care in transcribing many tapes dictated with strange words and names; to my wife, Marta Fuentes, for her unlimited moral support in the preparation of this work and in the decision to publish it, as well as for her help in revising the manuscript and in preparing the list of references (not all of which we were able to locate again after so many years and without my personal library); to Margaret Fay and Susan Jupp and the staff of Cambridge University Press for editing the manuscript; to the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg, Germany and the German Foundation for Peace and Conflict Research (DGFK) for the opportunity to edit and reproduce the manuscript; and to Immanuel Wallerstein and the Fernand Braudel Center, to Clemens Heller and Maurice Aymard at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and

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Jacques Revel for their decision to publish this essay in the series *Studies in Modern Capitalism*. At the same time, I should like to take this opportunity also to thank here the *compañeros* of the Publications Committee of the Student Center of the National School of Anthropology and History in Mexico who have translated this essay into Spanish and have undertaken to publish it in that language.

I should like to dedicate this modest essay and the incomplete work that it represents to ‘committed’ anthropological and historical research and especially to its committed *compañeros* in Mexico – committed to their people, to their culture and to their un-institutionalized revolution – whose own revolutionary dedication and responsible criticism of institutional *indigenismo* and other forms of populism do not deserve the unjust treatment to which they are sometimes subjected.

*Munich, 1975*  
*Frankfurt, 1978*

A.G.F.