

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Introduction: the Mexican hacienda

In his classic account of the formation of the great estate in New Spain, François Chevalier observed with some surprise that it is not until the latter part of the eighteenth century that we encounter any contemporary description of the Mexican hacienda.¹ Moreover, it is startling to note that the first comments by travellers from abroad were almost invariably hostile. On his journey to the North in 1777–78, Juan Agustín de Morfi, a friar from the Peninsula, sharply criticised the concentration of landownership in the colony, which left the countryside vacant and uncultivated. Passing through the district of San Miguel el Grande he found that the hacienda of La Erre devoted a vast area of land to mere pasture, whereas the Indians of the neighbouring village of Dolores lacked space to plant their maize.² Much the same reaction was expressed by the British Minister, H. G. Ward, who in 1827 deprecated the stark contrast on Jaral between the great fortified *casco* and the squalid huts of its peons.³

Official opinion coincided with the views of the travellers. By the late eighteenth century belief in the economic virtues of the proprietary farmer, with the consequent condemnation of any monopoly in landownership, had become articles of faith among the enlightened administrators who served the Bourbon dynasty. The same doctrines were embraced by the Liberal politicians who fought to transform Mexican society in the decades after Independence. The authoritative text here was the *Informe. . . de ley agraria*, written in 1793 by Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, a Minister of the Crown and a key figure within the intellectual circles of the Spanish Enlightenment. Inspired by his reading of Adam Smith, Jovellanos attacked the mortmain of the Church and the entails of the aristocracy as the chief obstacles to the development of agriculture in the Peninsula.⁴ Similarly, he advocated that the common lands of towns and villages should be distributed on an individual basis. With a free market in land thus assured, the elimination of all

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)

government regulation of the corn trade would leave the way open for an unrestricted increase in production and prosperity, based on a diffusion of ownership across the countryside.

The policies advocated by this minister of the Spanish Crown governed all future discussion of the agrarian problem in Mexico until the advent of the Revolution in the twentieth century. With the victory of the Liberal coalition in the 1850s, all Church property in land was first nationalised and then put up for sale. The common lands of the Indian communities were partitioned into family plots.⁵ Entails had been abolished long since. Perhaps the only distinctive element in the Mexican political scene was a certain strain of radical *indigenismo* which condemned the great estate as an illegal institution, with title deeds vitiated by the crime of the Spanish Conquest and the subsequent seizure of Indian lands. More common, however, was the presumption that once the legal and institutional impediments to the sale and partition of landed property were removed, the pressure of market forces would automatically induce the dissolution of the haciendas.⁶ It was left to Ponciano Arriaga in the Constitutional Debates of 1856 to argue that the feudal servitude which bound peons to the great estates would prevent the emergence of any broad stratum of free peasant farmers.⁷

Despite the almost universal condemnation of the hacienda by liberal intellectuals, it was not until 1895 that we encounter any juridical characterisation of the Mexican hacienda. Although the purpose of his study was a critique of recent agrarian legislation dealing with public lands, Luis Wistano Orozco concluded with a thorough-going attack upon the hacienda, defining it as a feudal institution, which, in accordance with its violent origin in the expropriations of the Spanish Conquest, continued to exercise a despotic, seigneurial power over the peons. A convinced advocate of the small property owner as the basis of political democracy, he sought to prove his case by a comparison of two districts in the state of Zacatecas. Villanueva was so dominated, not to say throttled, by six haciendas that the local town was virtually deserted owing to the absence of any market for merchandise. By contrast, its immediate neighbour, Jerez, flourished since the surrounding district was occupied by over 2,000 small proprietors, *rancheros*, among whom across the generations there operated a constant process of concentration and distribution of farmland.⁸ By way of remedy, however, Orozco only called for fiscal measures to effect a partition of the great estate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the Mexican hacienda*

3

The single most influential text dealing with the Mexican hacienda was published in 1909 by an ideologue of radical positivist persuasion, who at last succeeded in providing an economic foundation for the social critique of Orozco and Jovellanos. In *Los grandes problemas nacionales*, Andrés Molina Enríquez contrasted the vast, idle terrain of the latifundia with the intensively cultivated plots of the small-holders (*rancheros*) and of the Indian villages. The great estate was not a business: it was a feudal institution, often owned by the same family for several centuries, which so tyrannised its peons that they were little better than serfs. The very reverse of entrepreneurs, these landlords sought a safe, low return upon their capital, even to the point of using fertile corn-lands for low yielding maguey plantations. Indeed, the economic survival of the hacienda depended upon the low wages of the peons and upon a policy of self-sufficiency within the estate to meet the costs of production. In the fertile cereal-growing zone of central Mexico, the great estates restricted the cultivation of wheat and maize to the limited areas of land under irrigation so that most years urban markets were supplied by *rancheros* and by the villages.⁹ It was only after poor harvests that landowners released their stored grain to benefit from the high prices which then prevailed. Viewed from the economic standpoint, the hacienda in this zone was an artificial institution which impeded the rational exploitation of the soil by the energetic class of *rancheros*. Needless to say, all these points provided an ample justification for agrarian reform.

The upheaval of the Revolution prevented any further Mexican analysis of the hacienda other than in terms of polemic. Moreover, despite a certain proclivity for statistical compilation, American scholars merely extended the lines of interpretation already laid down by the Mexican jurists. For example, taking his cue from Orozco, G. M. McBride, admittedly a geographer rather than a historian, assumed that the great estate originated in the *encomienda* grants of Indian labour and tribute issued by the Crown to the first conquerors.¹⁰ This view held sway for some years before Silvio Zavala demonstrated that the two institutions of *encomienda* and hacienda possessed quite distinct legal origins, the one being a grant of labour, and the other a grant of land.¹¹ They were successive rather than contemporary phenomena. Indeed, the practice of debt peonage on the great estates only slowly evolved in response to the termination, first of the *encomienda*, and then of the dwindling of the drafted contingents provided by the *repartimiento* system.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)

But the liberal critique of the great estate only obtained a persuasive, historical substantiation in the work of François Chevalier, who, with a wealth of research material at his command, finally distinguished the feudal characteristics of the Mexican latifundium. True, he clearly distinguished the hacienda from the encomienda, and emphasised the importance of the export cycle based on silver-mining, which in the years after 1570 impelled both the colonisation of the North and the formation of the great estate. But above all else, Chevalier stressed the spendthrift, seigniorial qualities of a generation of settlers whose appetite for land far outstripped their capacity to exploit its resources. Moreover, the sharp fall in silver production which occurred during the seventeenth century provoked an economic crisis of such intensity as to drive the great estate back into a regime of subsistence farming in which labour was permanently retained by means of debt peonage. Reduced to a condition of rural isolation and individual self-sufficiency, haciendas in New Spain came to resemble the latifundia of Gaul after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Mexican peon found a counterpart in the medieval serf.¹² In short, Chevalier emerged from the archives with a perspective which in the last resort proved remarkably similar to the position of Molina Enríquez. Undoubtedly, the acclaim which greeted his book sprang from its underlying congruence with the main critical tradition: his work will remain classic precisely because it resumes and concludes an entire cycle of research and interpretation.

In recent years, however, a series of regional studies have raised new questions. As is so often the case, the mass of new empirical data has undermined long-held beliefs without as yet advancing any general theory to explain the evidence. In his monumental survey of the Aztecs under Spanish rule in the Valley of Mexico, Charles Gibson described the survival of the Indian village as a free community, governed by its own elected magistrates, which frequently retained possession of at least part of its ancestral lands until the close of the colonial period. Turning to the haciendas, he found that the debts of the resident peons were neither so great nor indeed so common as to be held responsible for the reduction of an entire class to a condition of serfdom. Indeed, to bring the harvest in, many estates hired labourers from neighbouring Indian villages, and at the same time were prepared to rent land to farmers from these villages. Then again, the managers of the estates, anxious to maximise profits, kept a close watch on the movement of corn prices in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the Mexican hacienda*

5

the Capital.¹³ Viewed in the round, these findings offered a clear challenge to the customary perspective.

Yet more revisionist, William Taylor discovered that in the Valley of Oaxaca virtually all Indian villages remained in control of their community lands, which were more than sufficient for their needs. Equally striking, throughout the colonial period, their hereditary chieftains, the caciques, figured among the leading landowners in the area. Although debts were quite high, the peons resident on haciendas were few in number, so that most estates relied on the villages for most of their labour requirements. Profits were low, and by the eighteenth century, two thirds of the capital value of these properties was absorbed by Church mortgages and annuities, with the consequence that the turnover in ownership proved remarkably rapid.¹⁴ The image here is of a relatively weak, unstable institution, burdened by accumulated debt and circumscribed by a recalcitrant Indian society.

A quite different pattern of land tenure and labour recruitment was to be found in the northern province of San Luis Potosí. There, Jan Bazant encountered latifundia which, in the absence of any pre-existing network of Indian settlement, dominated vast stretches of territory. By the nineteenth century debt peonage was a convenience rather than a necessity, and many workers avoided its operation. In fact, the resident peons who received a monthly wage and a weekly maize ration formed a privileged group within the work-force of the hacienda. Far more numerous and more deeply in debt were the tenants and sharecroppers who occupied an appreciable area of the estate.¹⁵ The existence of this class of *arrendatarios* has important implications for any interpretation of the hacienda, since of course it offers comparison with the manor of medieval Europe. The similarity is heightened by the practice of hiring labourers by the day to assist with the harvest, men probably recruited from among the families of the tenants.¹⁶ In conclusion, Bazant rejects the notion that at the close of the nineteenth century haciendas were not commercial enterprises, since they were ready to invest in new lines of production and alert to the possibilities of export markets.

Finally, it has become clear that in highland areas situated at some distance from urban markets, haciendas exercised but a loose control over their territory. In the uplands of Jalisco and Michoacán, a class of tenant farmers emerged who, in the decades after Independence, took advantage of the disintegration of several latifundia to create an entire range of small independent farms. In his *Pueblo en*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)

viola Luis González portrays the emergence of this class of prosperous rancheros as the constitutive social element in the district of San José de Gracia.¹⁷ This transformation of tenants into proprietary farmers has important bearing on the nature of agricultural enterprise in Mexico. If here, why not elsewhere? No doubt, location theory will offer some clues, but at first glance the case confirms the assertions of Molina Enríquez as to the 'artificiality' of the great estate as a unit of production.

At this point let us broaden the terms of the discussion. For if the image of the hacienda as a feudal institution endured so long, it was because both positivists and marxists agreed upon the necessity for agrarian reform. The great estate presented an obstacle to their hopes for a modern system of agriculture, be it capitalist or socialist. Viewed from a historical perspective, the latifundium appeared as the bedrock of the *ancien régime* in Mexico. However, this oddly convenient alliance was disturbed by the emergence of marxist theorists, led by Andre Gunder Frank, who argued that since the Americas had been conquered under the aegis of Western capitalism, the structure of their economies was determined by their dependent condition. The hacienda was the instrument of a dependent, colonial capitalism.¹⁸ Moreover, the enserfed condition of hacienda peons was interpreted as the consequence of this dependent relation. After all, the same regressive effects in the labour system could be observed in the tropical plantations which relied on slavery. Behind the arguments of this school, of course, was the authoritative text of Lenin on Imperialism.

For the historian, the most useful effect of these doctrines has been the encouragement to compare Latin America with Eastern Europe. For in that part of the world several scholars had already formulated certain theories about the nature of traditional agriculture which can be profitably applied elsewhere. In Russia the economist A. V. Chayanov calculated that where investment in new techniques or machinery is absent, labour forms the chief cost of agricultural production. In consequence, once the constraints of serfdom are abolished, the free peasant family, accustomed to relatively low levels of subsistence, can survive crop prices in the market which are simply uneconomic for the agriculturist dependent on hired labour. When prices fall, the peasant enterprise expands its volume of production through additional increments of labour at the very point where the landlord finds his wage-bill exceeds the market return, and hence is obliged to suspend operations.¹⁹ In the long

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the Mexican hacienda*

7

term, peasant farming will eliminate wage labour and the capitalist enterprise.

Chayanov's theory, elaborated to interpret the changes in Russian agriculture after the abolition of serfdom in 1861, has been deployed by Witold Kula to define the nature of feudal production in Poland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There, the great estate depended for its main income upon the export of wheat to Western Europe. Through an analysis of account papers Kula demonstrated that production was only maintained at prevailing market prices through the effective subsidy of the unremunerated labour of the enserfed peasantry. In fact, if workers had been paid wages at the going rate, the landlord enterprise could not have covered its operating costs. Moreover, when prices declined, the volume of output was expanded through greater inputs of labour.²⁰ Here, then, was an explanation of how the commercial relation with the capitalist West only served to strengthen the bonds of feudalism in Poland.

For Latin America, Marcello Carmagnani has applied the theories of Frank and Kula to the evolution of Chilean agrarian society in the period 1660–1830. There, it was the stimulus of Peruvian demand for wheat which impelled the transition from stockraising to cereal cultivation in the Central Valley. In the first cycle, with wheat prices high and land in abundant supply, landowners encouraged the settlement of *arrendatarios*, tenant farmers, as a source of income, and as a means to obtain more wheat. But in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when wheat prices declined, production was maintained and indeed expanded through the reduction of these *arrendatarios* to the condition of *inquilinos*, service tenants, who, in return for a plot of land for subsistence farming, provided virtually free labour for the landlord.²¹ The chief profits, however, of this export economy went to the merchants of Lima and their agents in Santiago de Chile. Thus Carmagnani argues that the pressures generated by overseas trade fortified and extended a seigneurial society in Chile.

If Mexico now be viewed from the perspective of Eastern Europe, it becomes clear that the failure of the first conquerors and settlers to persuade the Spanish Crown to grant them *encomiendas* in perpetuity is the key to the subsequent development of colonial agriculture. In the first generation, *encomenderos* such as Cortés had employed the free labour of their entrusted Indians to engage in a variety of undertakings, which ranged from wheat-farming and sugar

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)

planting to silver-mining and trade with Peru. But the application of the New Laws of 1542, which reduced encomenderos to mere pensioners of Indian tribute, when combined with the effects of the catastrophic decline in Indian population, meant that Spanish land-owners were now obliged to pay their workers a market wage. True, the Crown introduced a system of draft labour, *repartimientos*, but Indians obtained under this arrangement had to be paid a daily wage.²² In any case, in the vast provinces of settlement north of Mexico City, *encomiendas* and communities of settled Indians were rare, so that entrepreneurs, be they miners or stockmen, had to attract workers from Central Mexico through generous inducements, either in kind or in cash.

Then again, the survival of Indian villages as autonomous civic entities, often in possession of their own land, clearly prevented the creation of a dominant seigneurial society in central and southern Mexico. Indeed, if these inwardly-oriented communities were ever aroused from what Karl Marx once described as their Asiatic mode of production, it was in part because they had to pay tribute to a Crown more concerned with cash than with corn.²³ After the gradual elimination of the practice of draft labour in the mid seventeenth century, Indians were induced into the money economy through the distribution of merchandise and credit effected, and at times enforced, by the district magistrates, the *alcaldes mayores*, acting in partnership with merchants. In these *repartimientos de comercio*, mules and oxen from the north were sold on credit in the south, and the production of cochineal and cotton financed in advance by the disbursement of cash. In these operations the merchants of Mexico City and the leading provincial towns succeeded in hiring the judicial authority of the Crown to safeguard their business interests.²⁴ It was the system of *repartimientos* rather than debt peonage which most provoked unrest and riot.

The Mexican latifundium was created during the first great export cycle of 1570-1630 to cater for the needs of the urban, hispanic economy. The sugar plantations, the cattle and sheep ranches, and the cereal-growing estates all derived their income from sales to the domestic market, since transport costs eliminated the possibility of overseas exports for other than a few coastal properties. In consequence, when the precipitous halving of silver production in the years after 1630 led to a general contraction within the urban network as overseas trade also declined, many haciendas were either sold or simply left deserted by their bankrupt owners.²⁵ For without

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the Mexican hacienda*

9

sales whence was the money to come for wages? Vast stretches of land were abandoned for all but occasional pasture.

But what of debt peonage, that much advertised Mexican equivalent of European serfdom? For the hacendado in search of free labour, it was a remarkably poor substitute. More of an inducement than a bond, it required the advance of a considerable sum in cash or in goods to a group of labourers who might well abscond without repayment of the loan. In any case, these peons were still paid a wage at the going rate, and in addition received a weekly maize ration.²⁶ The contrast with Eastern Europe is all too obvious. In seventeenth-century Russia the nobility and gentry also faced financial ruin. But there the Tsars intervened to rescue them by subjecting the peasantry to the condition of serfs, charged with the obligation of supplying their masters free labour service. In later years a state bank was established to grant loans to the landowners at low rates of interest.²⁷ For such assistance the creole landowner pined in vain. Small wonder that the turnover in ownership was so rapid. By 1700 it was not uncommon to find landlords in debt to their workers.²⁸

For Central America, Murdo Macleod has shown that the Spaniards were relatively slow to acquire land in this region, since they were more concerned to obtain Indian labour for the cultivation of cacao and for silver-mining. Moreover, when yields sharply contracted during the middle decades of the seventeenth century, the urban economy equally experienced a severe decline which led to a virtual exodus out of the towns into agriculture. But far from initiating the formation of great estates based on debt peonage, this migration marked a shift into subsistence 'dirt-farming' by mestizo and impoverished Spanish small-holders.²⁹ For without the income of an export economy to sustain the towns, where was the market for the produce of haciendas?

Much the same trend can be detected in Mexico. Faced with a sharp contraction in urban demand, many landowners now threw open a considerable proportion of their land to tenant farmers and mere squatters. In the vast provinces of the North, *tierra adentro*, rents were often nominal since the concern here was to provide for some occupation of great tracts of scrubland. Arrangements varied from hacienda to hacienda, and the absence of written contracts prevents any precise description of the system. Later evidence suggests that in some cases, but not in all, tenants were obliged to assist the landlord at harvest, their services being rewarded at the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10236-0 - Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío 1700-1860

D. A. Brading

Excerpt

[More information](#)

standard daily rate. In effect, although rents were defined or measured in monetary terms, as so many pesos for so much land, at least part of the cost was met by the provision of labour. Even without a formal stipulation the presence of tenants and their families undoubtedly enabled landlords to operate their estates with a relatively small number of 'maintained' resident peons, depending upon workers hired by the day for the harvest and other seasonal tasks.³⁰ This system became especially prevalent in the north beyond Querétaro, where land was abundant and cheap, but labour scarce and comparatively expensive.

In the long term, however, the decision to establish a numerous body of tenant farmers, when taken in conjunction with the survival of the Indian village and the emergence in some areas of an extensive class of small-holders, threatened the economic viability of the average hacienda, which depended for its main income upon the sale of maize. For in the eighteenth century, when the steady increase in both silver production and population brought a renewal of urban demand for foodstuffs, it became profitable for tenants to sell their produce on the open market, using the income to pay cash rents or hire a peon to satisfy any remaining labour obligations. Moreover, the growth of population was still more than matched by the supply of land cleared for planting, so that corn prices, drought years apart, remained obstinately low throughout most of the century. In short, landlord agriculture came under heavy attack from peasant farming. It is pertinent to recall that a century later, Molina Enríquez was convinced that most maize was produced by villagers and small-holders.

If the great estate in Mexico during the eighteenth century in part evaded the application of what we may call the Chayanov principle, it was largely because the cyclical nature of colonial agriculture periodically eliminated the competition. Through a masterly analysis of maize prices in the Mexico City grain market, Enrique Florescano has shown that climatic changes on the central plateau led to such marked variations in harvests that, in addition to sharp seasonal fluctuations, corn prices oscillated violently from year to year. Under this regime, the key to consistent returns lay in storage capacity. In effect, Florescano agrees with Molina Enríquez that estate managers only sent grain to market when the supply from the villages and small-holders was on the wane or was exhausted. Indeed, he found that the better the harvest, the lower the volume of sales in the official market.³¹ Hacienda profits, therefore, were