Review

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Mexico's agrarian reform resulted from the revolution of 1910-20. Its most radical application was in the 1930s. Rather than a peasantry, though, this agrarian reform created a rural semiproletariat of farmers who rely heavily on wages to scrape a subsistence. They faced a heavily interventionist state, which engaged in selective subsidies that were usually heavily on wages to scrape a subsistence. They faced a heavily interventionist state, which engaged in selective subsidies that were usually regressive.

After a protracted agricultural crisis that had lasted since the mid-1960s, President Carlos Salinas (1988-1994) introduced another agrarian reform in 1992. Its three main components are that land in ejidos (land tenure form in the reform sector) can now be sold or rented; the state no longer has the responsibility for redistributing land; and while limits for individual landholding are kept at 100 hectares (1 hectare = 2.4 acres), corporations may operate as many as 2,500 hectares as long as at least 25 individuals are associate members and no one exceeds the individual limit of 100. With this and other neoliberal policies, ejidatarios (beneficiaries of agrarian reform) are now free of state control, but they are also deprived of virtually all state support.

Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform begins with a brief review of the origins of the ejido system and its several functions of political control, political representation, and organization for production. It next summarizes the main features of the 1992 reforms and presents the 1990 and the 1994 national surveys of the ejido sector that constitute its empirical core.

International migration was found to be a critical source of income in the ejido. This study confirms the theory that strongly established social networks at the points of destination facilitate migration. Destination points are overwhelmingly concentrated in California and Texas, while those of origin are states in North, North Pacific, and Central Mexico.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) introduces a comparative advantage for Mexican farmers to produce fruits and vegetables, but the ejido's ability to adapt was limited by lack of access to credit and technical assistance. Hence corn and beans, now the only crops with state subsidies, are overwhelmingly the most important crops, occupying 57 percent of the total cultivated land in the ejido in 1994. State credit and insurance between 1990 and 1994 decreased dramatically: Access to loans increased through Pronasol, an assistance program; but the mass of credit to the sector declined, and was diluted over a larger number of users. By 1994, only 8.6 percent of ejidatarios had some technical assistance, down from 59.6 percent in 1990.

Among activities supplementary to agriculture, livestock grazing increased by 20 percent between 1990 and 1994, the authors claim. My own calculations with census data do not confirm this increase, but I used data for both ejido and private sectors. Thus, unless there was a parallel decline of livestock production in the private sector, this figure calls into question the representativeness of the surveys or the sampling or weighting techniques used.

With neoliberal reform, the authors argue, an entrepreneurial peasantry is emerging in the ejido sector. Four strategies are behind this, which do not necessarily lead to success but help farmers stay afloat: monocropping corn in the fall-winter cycle, diversifying into fruits and vegetables, increasing cattle raising, and reinforcing the migration strategy. The determinants to success, however, were access to credit, irrigation, pastures and common lands, increased education, access to technology, and access to migration social networks. Since most of these were in short supply, especially credit, only a small percentage of farmers managed to pursue entrepreneurial strategies.

The chapter on inequality reaches a number of strong conclusions: "The ejidos with the smallest internal inequality . . . were those in the Center and North, those with a mestizo majority, and those with the oldest [land] endowments. In contrast, it was the indigenous communities that had the highest internal inequality" (p. 167). Something most agrarian analysis had always suspected but rarely quantified was the extent to which rural
producers depend on nonfarm incomes. The smallest farms depend on off-farm incomes for 81.9 percent of total income, including 46.7 percent from wages and microenterprises, with the rest coming from migration.

Poverty is extensive and deep in rural Mexico: “Overall, 47 percent of the households are in poverty and 34 percent in extreme poverty” (p. 197). In contrast, 25 percent of individuals are below the poverty line in the urban sector, and 34 percent nationally. Being a member of an indigenous community increases the probability of being poor or extremely poor, after controlling for access to land, education, and weaker migration networks. In fact, 71.2 percent of households in indigenous communities were poor, compared to 44.7 percent in ejidos.

The authors’ main policy conclusions involve filling the institutional vacuum left by neoliberal reform. Measures in this direction would include a favorable macroeconomic environment, the promotion of organizations through the ejido system, and public investment in irrigation and education. Differential policies should be pursued, reflecting the vast regional and social heterogeneity of rural Mexico.

Mexico’s Second Agrarian Reform is a rare book, in that most social science scholarship on Mexico tends to be historical and qualitative. This book provides rich and detailed quantitative analysis of the agrarian structure and its evolution between 1990 and 1994. Its merit is that it confirms many previously held views on a number of aspects of peasant economy on a quantitative empirical basis. Therefore, this book will become the obligatory reference for years to come on the most salient structural profiles of Mexican countryside.


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“Success is present in America!” In the early twentieth century, a Japanese journal named Amerika invited youth readers with hopes of Tobei (crossing to America). In most migration studies, economics is overwhelmingly emphasized as the explanation for immigration and settlement. Certainly, immigrants are often forced to become “economic men” because of their limited means and recent arrival. Yet Japanese youth in the Meiji era actually crossed the ocean not just for money, but also for other forms of “success.” Sawada’s perspective in this book is extremely sharp: She successfully describes the more complicated meanings of success for immigrants, which were embedded deeply in cultural and political contexts of the sending country, imperial Japan.

An intensive study on Japanese immigrants in the United States, this book is unique in two ways. First, unlike other major works on Japanese immigrants in the United States, which deal mostly with migrant workers on the West Coast or in Hawaii, the target of this analysis is hi-imin (literally, nonmigrant) in the East, particularly in New York. In the anti-Japanese climate in early twentieth century, hi-imin designated “a person who neither was a laborer nor intended to engage in labor once in the United States” (p. 44). The Japanese government tried to differentiate “culprits” from “gentlemen”—those whom it considered laborers, both skilled and unskilled, “who have less opportunity for cultivation,” from those of the “educated classes,” who theoretically did not intend to settle permanently in the United States (p. 53).

Second, Sawada thoroughly investigates influences of the pre-immigrant period, especially focusing on the attitudes and ideologies of urban youth in Tokyo. Each immigrant has, to whatever conscious degree, an image of the country which s/he will visit. Sawada tries “to present the world of the United States as it might have been