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LA PRIVATIZACIÓN DE LA PROPIEDAD SOCIAL EN MÉXICO. (I)LEGALIDAD Y (I)LEGITIMIDAD SOCIAL DE LA ENAJENACIÓN DE TIERRAS EJIDALES EN UN CONTEXTO NEOLIBERAL [View project](#)

Where is the Rural?

Ejidos/Comunidades

By Gabriela Torres-Mazuera

Abstract

Over the course of their existence, peasant cooperatives known as *ejidos* and *comunidades* have significantly reconfigured the property relations, landscapes, and settlements of rural Mexico. These cooperatives remain relevant today, even though most of Mexico's rural population now makes its living from activities other than agriculture. New uses, meanings, and values have attached themselves to the deagrarianized lands. Perhaps the most innovative resignification has been promoted by inhabitants who resist land commodification through a discourse of rights to Indigenous territory.

Keywords: urbanization, Mexico, communal property, cooperative farming, land rights

Many small towns and villages in Mexico, which are currently categorized as either urban or semi-urban, were founded as peasant cooperatives with usufruct rights to agricultural land. Following the 1910 Mexican Revolution, these cooperatives were created as part of a widespread program of land allocation aimed to redistribute the extensive holdings of a relatively small group of wealthy landowners or *hacendados*. This agrarian reform program lasted more than sixty years, and, when it ended in 1992, it had allocated land to almost four million peasants through a land endowment called *ejido* or through the restitution of communal property to *pueblos* (later referred to as *comunidades*).

Ejidos were, ironically, the foundation of the urbanization of modern Mexico, as new settlements were created with reallocated lands. In 2017, some 30,082 *ejidos* and *comunidades* encompassed 103 million hectares or 51 percent of the Mexican territory. Over the course of their existence, *ejidos* and *comunidades* have significantly reconfigured the property relations, landscapes, and settlements of rural Mexico.

In contrast to private property, both forms of communal land-holding were meant to provide a subsistence base for peasant families; they were not to become an economic commodity. *Ejido* and *comunidad* lands (which I gloss as *agrarian lands*) were therefore inalienable and indivisible. They entailed a set of obligations for *ejido* beneficiaries, like working the land with their own hands, living within *ejido* or *comunidad* villages, and participating in *ejido* or *comunidad* assemblies. Over time, *ejidos* and *comunidades* began to play an important political role as intermediaries between rural dwellers and the federal government (Warman 2001). At their peak, between 1940 and 1970, these institutions exerted control over virtually all areas of community life in the countryside, including agricultural production and credit, access to land and natural resources, provision of services, and political participation.

Since the 1980s, a number of socioeconomic processes and legal reforms, as well as the interactions of new rural actors, have given rise to novel meanings and functions for *ejidos* and *comunidades*. Both institutions have evolved from primarily peasant organizations into urban communities with a growing population and an expanding array of urban services to manage (Azuela 1995; Torres-Mazuera 2012). The decline of agricultural activity is one of the factors contributing to the urbanization of the Mexican countryside. The percentage of Mexico's population actively working in agriculture has diminished from 60.1 percent in 1970 to 13.3 percent in 2010 (INEGI 1970, 2010). In some regions, croplands have been abandoned and young rural men work in the industrial, commerce, or transportation sectors, or

else they migrate to work in the United States. *Ejidos* and *comunidades* have thus been deagrarianized (Carton de Grammont 2009).

The feminization of the countryside has been another unexpected outcome of this process, resetting the value and use of agrarian lands. Nowadays, rural women and older adults are the principal agents of subsistence agriculture where it is still practiced (Vizcarra Bordi 2014). Land has also become an important source of cash income for rural families, many of them headed by women (Appendini and De Luca 2008). Since some governmental programs are linked to land ownership, it is not surprising that in recent years rural women have begun to claim legal access to agrarian lands and demanded their right to participate in the *ejido* and *comunidad* assemblies. If, in 1979, women represented only 1.3 percent of *ejido* holders, in 2018 the number had increased to 24 percent (PHINA 2018).

Since the 1990s, the expansion of protected natural areas has also changed the meaning and use of agrarian lands, giving forest land a new value in terms of the ecological services it offers to society. In 2009, agrarian lands encompassed 80 percent of all forests (Madrid et al. 2009, 81). Many *ejidos* and *comunidades* receive payments in exchange for managing their land to provide ecological services; in 2018, about 2.4 million hectares were enrolled in some conservation program.

In spite of the original intentions of agrarian reform, commodification is another process currently transfiguring agrarian lands. This transformation is associated with the growth of mining, so-called “flex crops” such as corn and soybeans, and logging (Otero 2008), as well as new projects related to tourist and urban development, energy production from oil extraction, and fracking to hydroelectric and renewable energies. Investments related to the exploitation of agrarian land are typically focused on large tracts, many of which are *ejidal* or communal. Such projects became feasible in 1992, with the reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which governs the nation’s assets and resources, including land, subsoil, minerals, and waters. In the same year, a new set of laws was passed, which had a common purpose: to allow for the incorporation of natural resources into the formal market and to facilitate the role of national and international companies in the exploitation of these resources. As a result, *ejido* lands have become an intermediate form of private property (Pérez Castañeda 2002, 123). All around Mexico, *ejidatarios* (*ejido* holders) are selling, renting, or leasing their lands; they have become a new kind of individual owner, with many rights over the *ejido* plots (to transfer, to inherit, to access, to exploit), but without the obligations toward families or communities that they used to have.

The privatization and commodification of agrarian lands has not occurred without opposition. In many parts of Mexico, *ejido* and *comunidad* assemblies have resisted the individualization of agrarian lands and the entrance of foreign investors. Yet, the most outstanding and innovative resistance has been driven by *ejido* and *comunidad* inhabitants who have resignified agrarian lands in terms of Indigenous territory, a discourse not prominent before 1992. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of people in Mexico who self-identify as Indigenous tripled, currently comprising 21.5 percent of the Mexican population (INEGI 2010; Vázquez Sandrin and Quezada 2015). Under a legal framework created by the signing of the International Labor Organization’s Convention No. 169 in 1991 and buttressed by later reforms, agrarian lands can be defended in terms of ancestral territories to which Indigenous people have a right. In places such as the Yucatan Peninsula, Chihuahua, Michoacán, Chiapas, Guerrero, and Nayarit, Indigenous organizations and groups have initiated legal fights against extractive projects and land privatization in terms of the right to territory, with some recent success (Torres-Mazuera, Mendiburu, and Godoy 2018).

Today, progressive and conservative forces alike are shaking *ejido* and *comunidad* institutions. Rural youth and women mostly propel the progressive forces, some self-identifying as Indigenous people who are reclaiming their rights of access to and participation in agrarian institutions that historically excluded them. An opposing force is led by mostly male and elderly *ejidatarios* (52 percent of *ejidatarios*

and *comuneros* in 2007 were over fifty years old) who have become a sort of rural oligarchy (INEGI 2007); less than 6 percent of *ejido* and *comunidad* inhabitants have a legal right to agrarian land (Torres-Mazuera 2012). Thus, the main contest in the activist arena today revolves around the tension between *ejidos* and *comunidades* as a collective heritage with ecological, cultural, and social uses and values, or as individual assets to be converted into private property.

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