

AGRARIAN CROSSINGS: THE AMERICAN SOUTH, MEXICO, AND THE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY REMAKING OF THE RURAL WORLD

by

TORE CARL OLSSON

(Under the Direction of Shane Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

In the first half of the twentieth century, agrarian reformers in the American South and Mexico came to imagine themselves as confronting a shared problem. Diagnosing rural poverty, uneven land tenure, export-oriented monoculture, racialized labor regimes, and soil exploitation as the common consequences of the plantation system, they fostered a transnational dialogue over how to overcome that bitter legacy. Of the many voices in that conversation, particularly important was that of the Rockefeller philanthropies, who began their career in social uplift by targeting the poverty of the U.S. Cotton Belt in the Progressive Era. When they founded their renowned Mexican Agriculture Program of the early 1940s – a program that would ultimately provide the blueprint for the Green Revolution, or the Cold War project of teaching American-style scientific agriculture to Third World farmers – it was explicitly modeled on their earlier work in the American South, a region that Rockefeller experts used as a domestic laboratory for rural reform. While of great significance, the Rockefeller philanthropies were not the sole voice in the U.S.-Mexican agrarian dialogue, and the directionality of intellectual influence did not only flow southward. Especially during the radical 1930s, New Deal reformers worried

about U.S. southern rural poverty looked to the Mexican Revolution's evolving policy of land reform for inspiration, drawing upon it to draft similar programs for the Cotton Belt. Ultimately, the dissertation reveals that the project of rural "development" was decidedly diverse at mid-century, and was forged in a transnational crucible. Likewise, it demonstrates that integrating the history of the American South with that of Latin America and the Caribbean can get us beyond the historiographical dichotomy that separates U.S. and Latin American history in the twentieth century.

INDEX WORDS: Transnational, agriculture, agrarianism, comparison, rural life, Mexico, American South, land reform, Green Revolution, development, sharecropping, tenancy, Rockefeller Foundation, General Education Board, New Deal, Mexican Revolution, New South, Frank Tannenbaum, Josephus Daniels, Henry Wallace, Lázaro Cárdenas, Porfirio Díaz, Porfiriato, Franklin Roosevelt, Manuel Avila Camacho, Miguel Alemán, Seaman Knapp, Mexican Agricultural Program, hybrid corn, cotton, education, Southern Tenant Farmers Union, United States Department of Agriculture, agronomy, agricultural science

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DEDICATION

To Kelli, Ragnar, Ingrid, and my parents, who made it all possible

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Shane's unwavering support and guidance kept me afloat during an incredibly trying process. In short, he has been the model adviser, in both his intellectual engagement and professional support. This might be expected praise for senior scholars who have advised graduate students for decades, but the fact that I am Shane's first doctoral student makes his experience and guidance even more impressive. As I begin to advise graduate students of my own, I can only hope to approach the incredibly high standard he has set.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL AGRARIAN DIALOGUES	1
 CHAPTER	
1 DISPOSSESSION, REVOLT, AND AFTERMATH: THE AMERICAN	
SOUTH AND MEXICO, 1880s-1920s	24
The New South and the Porfiriato	29
Southern Populism and the Mexican Revolution.....	40
The Aftermath of Revolt.....	56
2 SHARECROPPERS AND <i>CAMPESINOS</i> : AGRARIAN COMPARISONS	
DURING THE NEW DEAL AND PLAN SEXENAL, 1933-1937.....	75
Reading Mexico through a Southern Lens: The Education of Josephus	
Daniels	81
Reading the U.S. South through a Mexican Lens: Frank Tannenbaum and	
the Sharecroppers' Struggle.....	95
3 POLITICAL PILGRIMAGES: INTELLECTUAL BORDER CROSSINGS	
AT THE U.S.-MEXICAN AGRARIAN APEX, 1937-1943	121
The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in La Laguna	127

	U.S. Agrarian Bureaucrats in Cárdenas' Mexico.....	136
	A Cárdenas Trip to the United States	147
	Mexican Agronomists in the New Deal South	154
4	READING THE SOUTH SOUTHWARD: ROCKEFELLER RURAL DEVELOPMENT FROM THE U.S. COTTON BELT TO MEXICO, 1935- 1943.....	169
	The Rockefeller Philanthropies since 1914	175
	The Early Push for a Mexican Program in Agriculture	182
	A Return to the South	192
	Henry A. Wallace and the Road to Mexico	200
	The Survey Commission and the Birth of the Mexican Agricultural Program.....	221
5	ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENTS: APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE EARLY MEXICAN AGRICULTURAL PROGRAM, 1940- 1945.....	233
	Politicizing Agricultural Production in Post-Cárdenas Mexico.....	241
	The Early Rockefeller Program and Experiments in Appropriate Technology	255
6	NARROWING VISIONS: THE COLD WAR AND 'MEXICAN MIRACLE' POLITICS IN THE MAKING OF AN EXPORTABLE GREEN REVOLUTION, 1945-1950	274
	Negotiating a Maturing Research Program.....	275
	At the Crossroads: 1946.....	283

Mexican Frustrations, Global Temptations.....	297
EPILOGUE: THE SHARED GREEN REVOLUTION	316
The American South	318
Mexico	329
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	344

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: GEB corn demonstration in Mississippi, late 1900s or early 1910s	69
Figure 1.2: GEB corn club demonstrator in South Carolina sits by his record-breaking corn yield of 1910.	69
Figure 2.1: Franklin Roosevelt and Josephus Daniels in the United States, 1940.....	84
Figure 2.2: Frank Tannenbaum researching his dissertation in rural Mexico, 1920s.....	88
Figure 2.3: Josephus and Addie Daniels in <i>charro</i> costumes, Mexico City, 1937.....	92
Figure 3.1: Location of the Laguna zone within Mexico.....	130
Figure 3.2: Gonzalo Andrade Alcocer and colleagues at a Soil Conservation Service field site, 1943	161
Figure 4.1: The structure of the Rockefeller philanthropies and the chronology of their establishment.....	177
Figure 4.2: Portrait of John A. Ferrell from the late 1930s.....	183
Figure 4.3: Welcome parade with banners for Henry A. Wallace in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, late November 1940	206
Figure 4.4: Wallace speaking with a family in Tamazunchale, San Luis Potosí, late November 1940.....	207
Figure 4.5: Attendees at Manuel Avila Camacho's inauguration, December 1940	207
Figure 4.6: Henry Wallace, Josephus Daniels, and their wives Ilo and Addie at the American Embassy in Mexico City, December 1940.....	209

Figure 4.7: The Rockefeller Foundation Survey Commission team on horseback, Mexico, 1941	224
Figure 5.1: Distributing iron plows to farmers in Jalisco, 1943	252
Figure 5.2: Portrait of Marte R. Gómez by Frida Kahlo, 1944.....	254
Figure 5.3: Shucking Rocamex corn for seed distribution at Chapingo, mid-1940s	272
Figure 6.1: Albert Mann near Guadalajara, Jalisco, 1944	286
Figure 6.2: Lázaro Cárdenas, Henry A. Wallace, and Marte R. Gómez at the MAP test plots at Chapingo, September 1946	291
Figure 6.3: Cárdenas, George Harrar of the MAP, Wallace, and Gómez touring MAP corn plots at Chapingo, September 1946	292
Figure 6.4: Gómez, Cárdenas, and Wallace admiring farm machinery at MAP headquarters in Chapingo, September 1946	292
Figure 6.5: President Miguel Alemán inspecting corn seed to be distributed by the Corn Commission, 1947	302

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAA.....	Agricultural Adjustment Administration
AGN.....	Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City
AHSRE	Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City
AMRG.....	Archivo Marte R. Gómez, Mexico City
ARFF.....	Archivo Ramón Fernández y Fernández, Colegio de Michoacán, Zamora
BAE.....	Bureau of Agricultural Economics
BMLT	Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City
BNCA	Banco Nacional de Crédito Agrícola
BNCE.....	Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal
FSA	Farm Security Administration
FDRL	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY
FTP.....	Frank Tannenbaum Papers, Columbia University, New York, NY
GEB.....	General Education Board
GEBP	General Education Board Papers
GFP	George Foster Peabody Papers
IEB	International Education Board
IHB.....	International Health Board of the Rockefeller Foundation
IHD	International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation
LoC	Library of Congress, Washington, DC
MAC	Manuel Avila Camacho Papers
MAP.....	Mexican Agricultural Program of the Rockefeller Foundation
MAV	Miguel Alemán Valdés Papers
NA.....	National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD
NS	Natural Sciences Division of the Rockefeller Foundation
PNR.....	Partido Nacional Revolucionario
PPF.....	President's Personal File
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional
PSF.....	President's Secretary's File
RAC	Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY
RF.....	Rockefeller Foundation
RFA.....	Rockefeller Foundation Archives
RG.....	Record Group
SAF	Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento
SARH.....	Records of the Secretaría de Agricultura y Recursos Hidráulicos
SHC.....	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC
SS	Social Sciences Division of the Rockefeller Foundation
STFU	Southern Tenant Farmers' Union
STFUP.....	Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City
USDA.....	United States Department of Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

TRANSNATIONAL AGRARIAN DIALOGUES

In June of 1939, after a long train trip, H.L. Mitchell gazed with wonder upon a land where cotton stretched to the very edges of the horizon. While downy fields of white were not unfamiliar to Mitchell, who as the leader of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union had spent much of the previous decade working to organize black and white cotton pickers in the U.S. South, at that moment he stood more than a thousand miles from his Union's headquarters in Memphis. He was in the heart of the Mexican cotton district of La Laguna, which spanned the arid northern states of Durango and Coahuila. Mitchell had not come as a tourist, or at least not one of the traditional stripe: he had come to observe the Mexican government's recent political experiment in land reform. Two years prior, Mexico's leftist nationalist president Lázaro Cárdenas had responded to the militarization of the region's cotton pickers by selecting the Laguna zone as a flagship demonstration of the revolutionary state's land redistribution program. In the months that followed, government surveyors had expropriated the vast holdings of absentee landlords, subdividing and deeding small plots to the pickers who had formerly worked the soil.

Mitchell had long been bitter over the close alliance between U.S. southern planters and the American federal government, and was astonished in seeing the Mexican state join hands with the rural dispossessed. In La Laguna, he marveled, cotton workers were once "exploited and without hope as were Arkansas sharecroppers," but the Mexican Revolution had reversed history's course. The days spent in La Laguna

reinvigorated Mitchell's once-flagging hopes for a similar transformation at home, and he returned to the United States later that month pondering the political lessons he had learned south of the border. With their own "problem of getting land for the landless," Mitchell wrote on the way home, his union ought to push for "a legislative program of expropriating our absentee landlords...as well." If only U.S. southern tenants and croppers could achieve the levels of political mobilization he had witnessed in rural Mexico, then "we, who have plenty of rich, fertile land and no deserts to contend with, can show the Mexican farmers something."¹

Mitchell's transnational allegory, rather than aberration or oddity, was but one thread in a tight web that bound two regions then struggling with a common plantation heritage. Acknowledging the power of cosmopolitanism in shaping rural as well as urban life, this dissertation examines the shared agrarian history of the American South and Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century and the dialogue between the two on questions of land, agriculture, and rural life. It demonstrates how a diverse array of rural reformers – farmers, agronomists, politicians, academics, and government bureaucrats from both nations – came to use comparison as a principal tool in staging a reconstruction of their respective countrysides. The rural United States and Mexico, they observed, shared a mutual problem. Emphasizing the connections between the U.S. South and the cash-crop zones of Mexico, they diagnosed uneven land tenure, racialized systems of labor, monoculture, and soil exploitation as products of the long-lived plantation system. If the U.S. South and Mexico had been forged in a common crucible, these observers concluded, then common solutions would also be effective in both regions. Over the

¹ H.L. Mitchell and Farish Betton, "Land and Liberty for Mexican Farmers," July 1939, reel 12, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers (microfilm), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

course of a half-century, and most noticeably in the 1930s and 1940s, American and Mexican reformers engaged in a lively debate over how best to reverse the rural poverty and inequality of previous generations. Their solutions, contradictory and often at odds, revealed that the emerging project of rural “development” was still wildly diverse and multifaceted, and that it was forged in a transnational crucible.

Among the many voices in the U.S.-Mexican dialogue, one institution in particular – the Rockefeller philanthropies – looms larger than others in its power and influence. In the chapters that follow, I illustrate how the American South and Mexico became twin laboratories for these New York-based reformers as they sought to harness the possibilities of twentieth-century natural and social science in refashioning the world’s countryside, a profoundly influential and transformative project that ultimately became known as the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. The roots of that campaign, however, go back far earlier than most scholars have recognized, and may be found within the United States rather than abroad. Organized Rockefeller philanthropy began right after the turn of the century, and it was particularly the rural poverty of the southern Cotton Belt that struck a chord within John D. Rockefeller Jr., son of the oil baron and the architect of the family’s earliest philanthropic projects. Their first vehicle for attacking American poverty was the General Education Board, founded in 1903, which explicitly targeted the rural South as the nation’s greatest failing. The Board’s officers quickly looked beyond the schoolhouse to the region’s larger economic woes, highlighting especially how cotton culture kept tenants and croppers poor. Between 1905 and 1914, the Board waged an aggressive yet contradictory campaign to both improve cotton cultivation and to break farmers’ addiction to this single crop. Meanwhile, they

engineered a vast public health program to combat hookworm infection, malaria, and yellow fever in the southern states. When the internationally minded Rockefeller Foundation was chartered in 1913, its architects intended it to globalize the lessons that the philanthropies had learned in the cotton South.

In 1943, after a long abstinence from agricultural reform, the Rockefeller Foundation inaugurated its Mexican Agricultural Program, which partnered with Mexico's revolutionary state to raise the yield of food crops among small farmers who had benefited from the land redistribution campaigns of the 1930s. That program had been conceived by two North Carolina veterans of the philanthropies' earlier agricultural and public health work, whose diagnosis of Mexican poverty likened it to the problems of the post-Civil War South. Pushed by this older southern generation to translate American regional solutions abroad, Rockefeller administrators and scientists in the 1940s relied explicitly on models and experiences born from the philanthropies' earlier work in the U.S. Cotton Belt. Rather than a neat and cohesive package, the Mexican program inherited the contradictions of the earlier southern work and its dilemma about whether poverty was due simply to low production or structural inequalities. Nevertheless, in its first few years, the Foundation's Mexican program was surprisingly sensitive to the social and economic limitations that most Mexican farmers confronted, and this sensitivity grew from memories of working with marginal farmers in the U.S. Cotton Belt. But as America's Cold War agenda to contain communism seeped its way into the offices of the Rockefeller Foundation and Mexican politics turned rightward in the late 1940s, Foundation planners chose to narrow their strategy toward solely raising yields, and they did so by partnering exclusively with large and commercially oriented farmers.

The consequences of that decision would be enormous. In the years after 1950, the Rockefeller Foundation transplanted the lessons it had learned in the American South and Mexico on nearly every continent across the globe. Beginning work in Colombia in 1950, by 1955 they were in Chile, and then in 1957 they began operation in India. The Rockefeller Foundation was soon joined by other agencies, such as the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development, whom each saw the campaign of raising food yields in the non-aligned world as an essential step toward neutralizing rural discontent and the resultant sympathies toward communism. By 1968, when William S. Gaud of USAID coined the term “Green Revolution” to describe the campaign of agricultural technical assistance, it had become one of America’s foremost Cold War strategies. Yet rather than ending hunger, the Green Revolution in its mature phase simply exported rural poverty to the slums of swelling cities by uprooting small-scale farmers, ultimately boosting food production but doing little to minimize social and economic divisions.

Therefore, one of this dissertation’s major contributions lies with the study of American-led development in what is today called, rarely with gesture to irony, the Global South. “Development” is a word heavy with historical baggage. Like “civilization” in the nineteenth century, the word “development” in the twentieth century served to simplify complex global relationships. In this dissertation, I use “development” to describe the Western-led project that was motivated by the belief that human societies evolve similarly and can be charted linearly, and that assistance from “developed” societies to “undeveloped” ones can speed the latter’s progress.²

² As a concept to describe global inequalities, the word exploded in popularity during the 1950s and 1960s, but I argue that its intellectual origins go further back in the United States. My thinking on the etymology

Perhaps the most celebrated – yet equally vilified – of the First World’s many development projects in the post-1945 era, the Green Revolution has almost entirely been understood as a project born outside of the United States and within a Cold War crucible.³ I depart from this body of literature in demonstrating that the American South served as the domestic incubator in which that project was hatched. Indeed, acknowledging the importance of U.S. regionalism abroad forces a reevaluation of monolithic understandings of American global expansion in the postwar years. Like many other U.S.-led internationalist projects during the “American Century,” the Green Revolution is commonly described as a campaign to “Americanize” Third World agriculture. I argue instead that rather than one, there were *many* Americas that served as blueprints for rural and agricultural transformation. Alabama and Iowa offered dramatically different models for rural uplift, and the former ultimately provided a far more realistic blueprint for fighting poverty. With its history of colonialism, extractive economics, racism, and uneven distribution of land and wealth, a place like Alabama more closely resembled the decolonizing republics of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

and meaning of development is largely derived from James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), xii-xvi.

³ Scholarship on the Green Revolution has been dominated by the social sciences, particularly economists and sociologists, and they have done little to flesh out that project as a historical process. Yet across all disciplines, scholars have agreed that the Rockefeller Foundation’s Mexican experiment during the 1940s was the first iteration of the Green Revolution project. The three best histories of the Green Revolution, Nick Cullather’s *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), John H. Perkins’ *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Joseph Cotter’s *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880-2002* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) are each deeply insightful of how politics and culture shaped a project that was far too often explained as purely technical or scientific, yet none of the three places much significance on the domestic American origins of the Rockefeller Foundation’s agricultural work nor the shifting geographical imaginaries of development planners. The only work to link the Rockefeller philanthropies’ early work in the U.S. South to the Green Revolution is Harry M. Cleaver, “The Origins of the Green Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1975), but it does not explore the Mexican program in detail and is largely based on conjecture rather than deep archival research.

While the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican Agricultural Program began in the 1940s by imagining its target society as analogous to the American South, thus acknowledging historical and structural inequalities, a decade later it was increasingly rare for development work to be modeled upon a region that symbolized American failure. Instead, a new generation of confident, hubristic planners championed the agriculture of an idealized Midwest as an unblemished model that could and should be replicated across the globe. In so doing, American development theorists committed the original sin that continued to haunt their long-lived project: they came to imagine the rural societies they targeted as composed of "people without history," in anthropologist Eric Wolf's memorable phrase. Misdiagnosing Third World poverty as the product of isolation, rural conservatism, and detachment from the world economy rather than uneven *connectedness*, First World development offered solutions to problems that did not exist while exacerbating those that did. By highlighting the complexities of American regionalism in forging the development project, I argue that this ultimate failure was neither preordained nor inevitable.⁴

While an essential voice in the U.S.-Mexican agrarian dialogue, the Rockefeller Foundation was nevertheless one among many. As the political tourism of someone like H.L. Mitchell of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union makes clear, the diversity of voices in that conversation was great, as was the range of participants' political goals and visions for the future. A central goal of this dissertation is to flesh out this transnational

⁴ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997 (1982)). My thinking on this "original sin" of development philosophy is very much a product of Ferguson's *Anti-Politics Machine*, James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998), Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), and J.T. Way's recent and impressive *The Mayan in the Mall: Globalization, Development, and the Making of Modern Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

exchange and reveal the important role it played in shaping both American and Mexican thinking about rural poverty and its solutions. Especially in the 1930s, when the revolutionary Mexican state crafted its own model of rural transformation based on land redistribution, sympathetic Americans either living in or interested in the U.S. South paid close attention to Mexican agrarian politics. U.S. New Deal reformers, particularly those affiliated with the Department of Agriculture, repeatedly looked south of the border for cues and suggestions as to the political and economic possibilities of land reform and agricultural diversification. The New Deal's engagement with Mexico's agrarian revolution, through a host of state and non-state actors, played a decisive role in radicalizing their governance of rural America. Some of the programs born of that engagement – such as the Farm Security Administration – would even have second lives abroad, when New Dealers were politically marginalized at home during the 1940s and left the United States. And not only did the New Deal look south: Mexican politicians during the radical 1930s also gauged their programs by the successes and failures of their northern neighbor.

Of the many recent works to “internationalize” the history of the twentieth-century United States, few have been more influential than Daniel Rodgers' 1998 book *Atlantic Crossings*, which beautifully illustrated how American social reformers during the Progressive Era and New Deal turned a keen eye to Western European experiments with welfare capitalism, social security, labor legislation, and urban planning. The ubiquitous European comparisons and voyages that U.S. reformers made and took, argued Rodgers emphatically, inaugurated an “Atlantic era in social politics,” and must be acknowledged to understand the expansion of the American state and its domestic

policy.⁵ But if the urban, labor-oriented reformers of the industrialized U.S. Northeast looked to London, Paris, and Berlin for models and blueprints, agrarian reformers grappling with the legacy of the plantation in the American South found little common ground on which to base a comparison with Western Europe. Instead, their gaze turned away from the Atlantic Ocean and toward the Caribbean basin, where they exchanged ideas with a diverse group of Latin American actors who approached the question of rural inequality in dramatically different ways. At times, their dialogue was far more socially aggressive than its Atlantic counterpart, especially during the radical 1930s, when visions of land redistribution echoed across the Gulf of Mexico. But by the late 1940s, the emancipatory possibilities of the Caribbean dialogue were truncated by the political polarization and backlash that followed the deepening of the Cold War, in a way not dissimilar to the end of the European dialogue. Ultimately, though, the intellectual crossings of the Caribbean basin would have far more lasting global consequences than that of Rodgers' Atlantic. When the United States exported its "way of life" across the globe during the post-1945 "American Century," it would not be the welfare-state democratic institutions of the Atlantic dialogue that would be pushed upon Africa, Latin America, and Asia, but the Green Revolution and its myopic emphasis on agricultural yield, production, and rural modernization. The intellectual exchanges of the Caribbean basin, therefore, might well be remembered on equal footing with the more familiar encounters between American and European intellectuals.

The shared rural history of the American South and Mexico as described within also serves to shatter the often-too-neat disciplinary dichotomy between American and

⁵ Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 4.

Latin American history. Following the insights of my protagonists, I argue that the American South is best understood as the northern-most fringe of a larger Caribbean world. While historians of colonialism, slavery, and emancipation from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries have integrated the American South within global flows of human beings, biota, capital, and ideas, those transnational perspectives nearly all disappear by the turn of the twentieth century.⁶ It is commonly assumed that in the first half of the twentieth century, the American South was at its most isolated and provincial, divorced from both national and global trends. I argue that such an assumption is fundamentally wrong.

In his work on the cosmopolitanism of U.S. southern slaveholders in the antebellum era, Matthew Guterl proposed a new geographic container – the American Mediterranean – to describe the deep interconnectedness of the American South with other societies of the Caribbean basin. Like the Mediterranean Sea of the Old World, the American Mediterranean was an interwoven space of cross-cultural interaction and shared histories. Yet rather than perishing with the age of slavery, the American Mediterranean remained a viable historical container into the first half of the twentieth century. But if race and slavery had been the defining link connecting the various Caribbean basin societies during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, it would be

⁶ A list of such works would be far too long to include here, but a few of the best recent ones are Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), and Sarah E. Cornell, “Americans in the U.S. South and Mexico: A Transnational History of Race, Slavery, and Freedom, 1810-1910” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2008).

the lingering class relations of the plantation that proved most compelling in the first half of the twentieth century. When reformers across the American Mediterranean contemplated their transnational connections during the 1930s and 1940s, they often based that understanding around the shared problems of uneven land tenure, export monoculture, and soil exhaustion and erosion.

As a study of the intersections of agrarian and agricultural reform between two nations, this is not a comparative history, but a *history of comparisons*. Rather than a neutral, apolitical act of observation, comparison reshaped domestic and diplomatic policy, moved people, and remade landscapes. Acknowledging that contemporary figures used comparison actively in making their world raises major questions about the value of comparative history itself. While useful, comparative studies have too often assumed the isolation and discreteness of the entities they seek to observe. For the purpose of establishing the validity of their comparison, scholars have therefore obscured the importance of actors and ideas that did not fit within their regional or national boundaries. The U.S. South, perhaps more than any other region, has long been a focus of such studies, from the 1940s to the present day.⁷ However, despite their insistence to the contrary, such histories have reinforced the nation-state as the appropriate container for human history, thereby overlooking the historic porosity of most national borders. This

⁷ Some classic (though rather problematic) works of comparative southern history include Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Knopf, 1947), Carl Degler's *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), Peter Kolchin's *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), George M. Fredrickson's *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), and John Cell's *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Despite the transnational turn's critique of comparative history, nationally defined comparisons continue to thrive; see Peter Kolchin, *A Sphinx on the American Land: The Nineteenth-Century South in Comparative Perspective* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003) and Enrico Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites: American Slaveholders and Southern Italian Landowners, 1815-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

dissertation does not consider the agrarian histories of Mexico and the United States South in separate vacuums, but instead pays particular attention to the actors, ideas, commodities, and capital that flowed *between* both regions.

As such, this project is deeply influenced by the transnational turn that has been especially prevalent in the historiography of the modern United States.⁸ While trans-border frameworks such as the Atlantic World and black Atlantic have been essential in rethinking contact, colonialism, and slavery in antebellum America, scholars of the twentieth century U.S. South have been far slower to integrate such transnational perspectives, though a number of recent works promise to lead the way in integrating the modern U.S. South with global history.⁹ Fortunately, historians of food and agriculture, whose subjects are far less often contained by national boundaries, have been much quicker than regional historians to consider such connections, and a number of excellent monographs serve this dissertation as models for writing about production and

⁸ Micol Seigel's critique of comparative history has especially influenced me; see "Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn," *Radical History Review* 91 (Winter 2005), along with her monograph *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). For a foundational text in transnational studies of the United States, see Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), along with the *Journal of American History*'s special issues "The Nation and Beyond" (86, no. 3, December 1999), and "Rethinking History and the Nation-State" (86, no. 2, September 1999).

⁹ The best three examples are Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), and David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Other notable attempts to bridge the gap between global and regional history are Erin Elizabeth Clune, "From Light Copper to the Blackest and Lowest Type: Daniel Tompkins and the Racial Order of the Global New South," *Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 2 (2010), Douglass Sullivan-González and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., *The South and the Caribbean: Essays and Commentaries* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), Andrew C. Baker, "Race and Romantic Agrarianism: The Transnational Roots of Clarence Poe's Crusade for Rural Segregation in North Carolina," *Agricultural History* 87, no. 1 (2013), Elizabeth Herbin, "Southern Segregation, South Africa-Style: Maurice Evans, Clarence Poe, and the Ideology of Rural Segregation," *Agricultural History* (forthcoming 2013), and Natalie Ring, *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

consumption in global context.¹⁰ Interestingly, historians of Mexico, especially those working in Latin America, have expressed far less interest in transnational method than their American colleagues, due in large part to the absence of national exceptionalism that has so profoundly structured American historiography.¹¹

Recognizing the deep historical connections between the southeastern regions of the United States and Mexico also promises to expand the recent historiographical fascination with the “borderlands” between those two nations. Fueled in large part by contemporary efforts to historicize the seeming impermeability of the modern U.S.-Mexican border, historians have revealed that what today appears to be solid was once a fluid and even imaginary line. Yet in their obsession with the physical land boundary between the two nations, borderlands historians have excluded other liminal spaces, such as the Gulf of Mexico, which separated plantation societies like Louisiana and Mississippi from those of Veracruz and Yucatán. While the flow between the American South and Mexico was marked more by intellectual exchange in the early twentieth century than large human migrations, acknowledging the ties that bound one to the other will only aid historians in their mission to reveal the shared past of the two nations.¹²

¹⁰ See especially Deborah Barndt, *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and Casey Walsh, *Building the Borderlands: A Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Mexico-Texas Border* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).

¹¹ An exception is scholarship on migration, a central theme in Mexican national historiography.

¹² The works of borderlands history that limit themselves to the southwestern United States and northern Mexico is too long to list here, going back as far as the groundbreaking work of Herbert Eugene Bolton in the 1920s. A recent special issue on “The Brave New World of Borderlands History” in the *Journal of American History* 98, Vol. 2 (Sept. 2011) begins to expand that container beyond that traditional sphere, but makes no reference to links between plantation societies of the Deep South and Mexico. However, two major exceptions that acknowledge U.S. southern connections with Mexico, however, are Cornell,

Likewise, this project's exploration of the *multidirectional* flow of political strategies and intellectual models between Mexican and American actors challenges both popular and scholarly interpretations of the uneven relationship between the two neighbors during the twentieth century. Acknowledging that American state and non-state actors frequently looked to Mexico for cues and suggestions in shaping their own policies, especially during the radical 1930s, complicates the commonly held perception that the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico was characterized solely by exploitation and domination. Rather than mere consumers of American culture and ideas, Mexicans forged their own approaches to social problems, and U.S. observers frequently took note in periods of political confluence.¹³

Over the course of six chapters, the dissertation explores the ways in which transnational comparisons impacted rural politics and projects of agrarian social engineering in both the United States South and Mexico. **Chapter One**, "Dispossession, Revolt, and Aftermath," sets the historical stage for the cross-border encounters that defined later years. More so than any other, this chapter uses comparative method to establish the common ground that American and Mexican agrarian reformers inhabited in the early years of the twentieth century. First, I examine how the New South era of the 1870s through 1890s and the long rule of Mexican president Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) were jointly characterized by the establishment of neocolonial, extractive economic

"Americans in the U.S. South and Mexico" and Julie M. Weise, "Fighting for Their Place: Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the U.S. South, 1910-2008" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2009).

¹³ In doing so, I am particularly inspired by several studies, particularly Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Karin Roseblatt, "Other Americas: Transnationalism, Scholarship, and the Culture of Poverty in Mexico and the United States," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (2009), Jeri Reed, "The Corn King of Mexico in the United States: A South-North Technology Transfer," *Agricultural History* 78, no. 2 (2004), and Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of All Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

relationships and the consolidation of large-scale landholding. In the post-Civil War American South, planters lost their slaves but not their land, and many actually increased their holdings by pulling a formerly independent white yeomanry into the cotton economy. In Mexico, the technocratic liberal Díaz engineered an enclosure movement meant to open rural Mexico to commercial agriculture and international capital, and under his rule millions of former peasants were forcibly converted to wage laborers and croppers while plantation and hacienda owners vastly expanded their power.

Yet in both regions, the triumph of *latifundismo* – large-scale landholding – did not go unchallenged. The second part of the chapter illustrates how two rural revolts challenged the planter class and their control of the countryside: the southern Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s and the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s. Born from shared frustrations, the two revolts nevertheless diverged in their visions of the future. Southern populism proved to be a relatively bloodless revolt that was stymied by racial divisions and largely co-opted by mainstream political elites. In Mexico, the bitter frustration of uprooted rural people erupted into a massive civil war that ultimately left more than a million dead, giving birth to rhetoric far more radical than its American equivalent. While both revolts were ultimately unsuccessful in forcing the changes that many of the rural dispossessed had hoped for, each nevertheless set the parameters for rural politics in the following generation. The last section of the chapter examines the aftermath of those social movements, and how the unanswered questions that had precipitated revolt continued to haunt the countryside. It is here that I briefly introduce the Rockefeller philanthropies' U.S. southern agricultural program of 1905 to 1914, which in many ways sought to address the earlier demands of Populism.

While the U.S. southern and Mexican countrysides were each characterized by political stasis and economic decline during the 1920s, the shock of the global economic collapse of 1929 dramatically unearthed rural frustrations that had long gone unanswered. Chapters Two and Three each detail how during the radical 1930s, state and non-state reformers in each region grew emboldened by capitalism's apparent failure and escalated campaigns to address rural inequality. In the course of that radicalization, they discovered their colleagues across the Gulf of Mexico, and rethought their own projects of rural reconstruction in light of their transnational comparisons. **Chapter Two**, "Sharecroppers and *Campesinos*," examines the bilateral intellectual traffic in agrarian strategies between Mexicans and U.S. southerners, with an emphasis on the earlier half of the decade. I begin by tracing the political education of an official diplomatic actor, Josephus Daniels, who served as the U.S. ambassador to Mexico from 1933 to 1942. Daniels was a North Carolinian who had a long history of participation in the agrarian politics of his native South. When he arrived to Mexico, at a moment when the ruling party was beginning to escalate an ambitious program of land reform, he quickly came to sympathize with the interests of the dispossessed Mexican smallholders over the plantation elite – many of whom were Americans – because he understood the *campesino* struggle as analogous to that of rural poor whites in North Carolina. Ultimately, his permissive stance on Mexican land reform proved to be one of the major ingredients in its lasting success.

Yet U.S. southern agrarian sympathies did not only reshape Mexico in these years, and the intellectual traffic flowed in the other direction too. The latter half of Chapter Two examines how idealist liberals within the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1934 and 1935 looked to the Mexican Revolution's blueprint for land reform as a

potential model for American political action. Led by the globetrotting scholar Frank Tannenbaum, who had studied rural problems in both the American South and Mexico during earlier years, the USDA liberals attempted to translate Mexican land reform into U.S. southern context. Their comparisons between the two regions ultimately gave birth to the Farm Security Administration (1937-1943). Unique in its political audacity and its departure from the rather centrist New Deal, the Farm Security Administration represented the only serious U.S. government attempt to address southern land tenure since the unfulfilled promises of Radical Reconstruction. Recognizing its Mexican origins forces us to seriously rethink the potential radicalism of the New Deal.

After 1936, when Franklin Roosevelt won reelection and Lázaro Cárdenas successfully neutralized the most prominent opponents of land reform in his nation, both the governments of the United States and Mexico put their respective agrarian projects in high gear. As they did so, the crossings between the two grew more frequent and influential. **Chapter Three**, “Political Pilgrimages,” examines how acts of political tourism and travel influenced the making of rural policy in each nation between 1937 and 1943. In both nations, the experience of traveling beyond one’s borders to observe the results of political experimentation was a transformative one. I pay particular attention to cosmopolitan bureaucrats within the New Deal Department of Agriculture – men like Henry A. Wallace, M.L. Wilson, Rexford Tugwell, and Mordecai Ezekiel – whose travel to and awareness of Mexico rivaled their more traditional gaze toward Europe. Their fascination with Mexico’s land reform and rural rehabilitation programs culminated in their 1942 plans for a symbolic visit of former Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas to tour Farm Security Administration, soil conservation, and dam sites in the rural U.S.

South. Yet American government actors were not the only ones to perceive a shared political mission: voices such as that of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, as described in this chapter's introduction, joined the bureaucrats in looking beyond the border for cues and suggestions. Likewise, Mexican students of rural problems also kept a close eye to American domestic politics in the period. While Mexican interest in American examples was not a new thing, and was wound up in earlier neocolonial relationships, during the 1930s and early 1940s it was a particular sort of teaching that Mexican students sought out north of the border. It was projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority, with its grassroots ideology and coupling of technological power with rhetoric of social uplift, that most attracted young agronomists who had begun their careers in the shadow of the Mexican Revolution.

The myriad crossings between U.S. southern and Mexican agrarian reformers during the radical 1930s blazed the trails that the Rockefeller Foundation would follow shortly thereafter. **Chapter Four**, "Reading the South Southward," marks a shift in the dissertation's focus toward the transnational career of the Rockefeller philanthropies and the making of a Green Revolution model of agricultural development. This chapter, the first of three to examine the Rockefeller Foundation, examines the circuitous path that led the philanthropies from the U.S. Cotton Belt to central Mexico. Between 1935 and 1941, two North Carolinian veterans of the earlier Rockefeller campaigns in southern agriculture and public health – Josephus Daniels and John Ferrell – pushed the Foundation to embark on a similar project in Mexico, a place they understood to share the American South's social and economic problems. Daniels and Ferrell were ultimately successful in doing so by 1941, when the Foundation agreed to conduct an initial survey

of Mexican agriculture to investigate the possibilities for a cooperative program. In likening Mexico to the Cotton Belt, which also had a divided and bitter history, the Foundation's planners broke with an emerging American desire to imagine the U.S. Midwest as the most appropriate model for poor rural societies across the globe. But while the Foundation's southern memories were deeply influential in leading it toward Mexico, equally important were contemporary New Deal models, especially ones born from the earlier transnational dialogue of the 1930s. This became abundantly clear when products of the agrarian dialogue, such as the Farm Security Administration, were themselves suggested in 1941 as offering potential guidelines for the Foundation's program in Mexico.

In 1943, the Rockefeller Foundation formally inaugurated their Mexican Agricultural Program, in cooperation with the government of Manuel Avila Camacho, devoted to raising the food crop yields of small-scale farmers. **Chapter Five**, "Alternative Developments," examines how the first three years of the Rockefeller program were deeply influenced both by Mexican political currents and scientists' continued reliance on U.S. southern experiences. The Avila Camacho years (1940-1946) were an incredibly fluid political era in Mexico, as the ruling party balanced the popularity of Cárdenas' land redistribution campaigns against demands for industrialization and urbanization. While countless scholars have criticized Cárdenas' successors for abandoning the land reform agenda, I argue that while Avila Camacho slowed active redistribution he invested heavily in an effort to make the *ejidatarios* – land reform beneficiaries – productive farmers, and that the Rockefeller program served as a central tool in that project. Nudged by their Mexican cooperators, Foundation scientists

tailored their agricultural work to benefit smaller and poorer farmers, rather than the large landowners who were often more eager to cooperate with American scientists.

If echoes of the Mexican Revolution's agrarian rhetoric played an important role in forging an alternative development vision during the early and mid 1940s, Rockefeller scientists' experience in the American South was of equal importance in fostering sensitivity to Mexican farmers' social and economic limitations. Transnational comparisons had given birth to the Foundation's Mexican program, yet they did not end there. It was particularly the memories of two Rockefeller corn breeders – Paul Mangelsdorf of East Texas and Edwin Wellhausen of West Virginia – that carried the greatest weight. Remembering how small-scale farmers in these marginal American regions had spurned double-cross hybrid corn, which required the annual repurchasing of seed, Mangelsdorf and Wellhausen rejected U.S. midwestern norms for Mexico, believing that the central plateau surrounding Mexico City more closely resembled Alabama than Iowa. Therefore, at its high water-mark in 1946, the Mexican Agricultural Program represented a powerful alternative strategy toward rural development, which acknowledged that Mexican rural poverty was the product of historical inequalities rather than timeless ignorance or isolation.

Not long after the Foundation arrived at an agricultural assistance program aimed at small farmers did that strategy come under ferocious attack. **Chapter Six**, “Narrowing Visions,” examines how during the latter half of the 1940s, domestic Mexican politics and global Cold War geopolitics served to excise the democratic ideologies and appropriate technologies from the Rockefeller Foundation's agricultural program, giving birth to the narrow Green Revolution model more familiar to scholars of U.S.-led

development. The transfer of presidential power from Avila Camacho to Miguel Alemán in 1946 was a key turning point in that process, as the now-renamed Institutional Revolutionary Party dramatically turned away from subsidizing the prosperity of land reform recipients. But of equal importance was the escalating pressure on the Rockefeller Foundation to dovetail its international programs with the U.S. State Department's Cold War policies. Looking for rapid improvements in yield for the purpose of advertising their Mexican project as a global model for preventing communism, the increasingly conservative leadership of the Foundation shifted their plant breeding emphasis from corn toward wheat.

That decision would have lasting consequences, for while corn was grown predominantly by smaller farmers in Mexico's densely populated center, wheat was overwhelmingly cultivated by large commercial farmers in the northern third of the nation. Norman Borlaug, the Mexican Agricultural Program's wheat breeder, was by 1948 beginning to reap major successes in boosting wheat yields in cooperation with large agribusinessmen in the northern state of Sonora. Growing frustrated with the slow progress of Paul Mangelsdorf's corn strategy in central Mexico, the Foundation's leaders made Borlaug's wheat program its flagship effort. By 1950, when the Foundation exported its Mexican work to Colombia – the first of many steps in their global expansion – the original development strategy based around appropriate technologies and social sensitivities, born of the American South, was hardly visible. Even though the Green Revolution would not be named as such until 1968, I argue that by 1950 the vital elements of that development package were neatly in place.

In the years after 1950, as the U.S. and Mexican governments along with the Rockefeller Foundation sought to aggressively “modernize” rural worlds for the purpose of producing cheap food and fiber, the American South and Mexico both underwent similar rural transformations. The dissertation’s **Epilogue** tells the story of how this came to pass. Technocratic development models, whether formally labeled as a Green Revolution or not, produced in the U.S. South and Mexico a simplified countryside dominated by experts and corporations rather than common people, where horses, mules, hoes, and hard labor were replaced by chemicals and machines. Those who had formerly tilled the soil were painfully uprooted in the process, and they fled the countryside during the 1950s and 1960s to swell the ghettos and shantytowns of industrializing cities. The American “urban crisis” of the 1960s was born of this southern enclosure, as was the escalating migration of rural Mexicans to the megalopolis of Mexico City and then the United States in the following decades. Yet rather than an isolated trend, the shared Green Revolution experience of the Caribbean basin was only a premonition of what would later come to pass across the Global South, as much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America followed similar paths toward urbanization and rural depopulation, instigated by similarly techno-political rural enclosure movements.

As early as 1953, the renowned American historian C. Vann Woodward argued that with its history of poverty, military defeat, and underdevelopment, the U.S. South was not exceptional, as many northerners viewed it, but rather representative of the normative global human experience.¹⁴ Yet despite Woodward’s prescient observation, few U.S. historians have begun to explore these linkages in a global context. Southern history, which shares far more with the plantation republics of the Caribbean basin than

¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, “The Irony of Southern History,” *Journal of Southern History* 19, no. 1 (1953).

the industrial North, continues to be submerged within a national narrative. In Mexico too, the stark borders separating it from its northern neighbor, both physical and imagined, have precluded an open conversation about historic commonalities and shared lives. It is my hope that this project may aid in transcending these artificial boundaries.

CHAPTER 1

DISPOSSESSION, REVOLT, AND AFTERMATH:

THE AMERICAN SOUTH AND MEXICO, 1880s-1920s

In December of 1890, thousands of representatives of the Southern Farmers' Alliance swelled the town of Ocala, in northern Florida, to angrily protest the exploitation of rural people. The white and black Alliance members who made the pilgrimage to Ocala came from diverse backgrounds and brought various gripes, but among the dominant group that hailed from the cotton-growing states of the Deep South, they were particularly infuriated by the continuing marginalization of small-scale farmers by an unholy alliance of planters, bankers, and railroad men. In the past generation, they had bitterly witnessed their political and economic prospects eroded by the expansion of plantation agriculture, unwillingly pulled into the orbit of that system as tenants and sharecroppers. Over the course of a week in Ocala, these rebels crystallized their political vision and put forth a plan for a more equitable countryside. The Ocala Demands, as their platform became known, called for the broad redistribution of power from the wealthy and landed to those who worked the soil. In the years that followed, those Demands would come to symbolize the heart and soul of America's last great rebellion of rural people against the forces of unrestrained capitalism.¹

A generation later, across the Gulf of Mexico, another group of rural rebels gathered with a similar purpose. In the village of Ayala in the central state of Morelos,

¹ Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 249-251; Samuel Proctor, "The National Farmers' Alliance Convention of 1890 and Its 'Ocala Demands,'" *Florida Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1950).

Mexico, agrarian leader Emiliano Zapata convened his followers in November 1911 to put forth an equally aggressive platform for rural change. They presented a litany of grievances not unlike the Alliance's at Ocala: over the last two generations, they too had seen commercial landowners dispossess formerly independent country people, claiming their land and binding them to sugar plantations as day laborers and tenants. In Morelos, the exploitation of the rural masses had been particularly sharp and egregious, and the peasantry had rallied behind Zapata and his vision. Speaking for his neighbors, the Morelos leader declared in his famous Plan de Ayala that rural people would rise up in armed revolt until the Mexican state addressed the social and economic inequalities of the countryside. As had been true of the Ocala Demands, Zapata's impassioned plea at Ayala would come to embody the spirit of the agrarian revolt that transformed Mexico during the decade that followed.²

To scholars who study either U.S. agrarian politics or the Mexican Revolution, the juxtaposition of Ocala and Ayala will likely be surprising and unexpected. Segregated by the dichotomy of "American" versus "Latin American" history, the two rural rebellions are rarely placed in conversation. U.S. southern Populism is remembered as a formal political movement, eventually co-opted and destroyed; the Mexican Revolution as a bloody social uprising fueled by peasant resistance. Turn-of-the-century agrarian revolt in the United States and Mexico, most scholars therefore assume, has little common ground. In seeking to overturn this assumption, I argue instead that the two societies that gave birth to the Ocala and Ayala demands – the American cotton South and the plantation zones of Mexico – underwent strikingly similar social, political, and economic metamorphoses in the *fin-de-siècle* era. Indeed, it was the shared dispossession,

² John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 393-404.

revolt, and aftermath of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that inspired the agrarian dialogue that blossomed during the 1930s and 1940s, as the bulk of this dissertation will explore. With the goal of establishing that context, this chapter will trace the strikingly similar agrarian trajectories of the American South and Mexico from the last years of the 1870s through the 1920s.

The basic narrative that defines those two trajectories is as follows. After the mid-nineteenth century's chaos of war and instability, a muscular political elite came to power in each region with seductive promises of stability and growth. Their positivist vision of economic development sought to rationalize and order a chaotic and diverse countryside for the purpose of bringing it within the folds of global capitalism. While largely successful in doing so, that program of development benefited the very few while eroding the last semblances of independence and self-sufficiency among the rural majority. In response to the assault on their autonomy, country people revolted against the new order in two rebellions, southern Populism and the Mexican Revolution, putting forth their own vision for a stable and equitable countryside. While historians have celebrated those revolts as moments of democratic promise, in the eyes of those who led the most sweeping attacks on the status quo their struggle was a failure, at least in its immediate aftermath. Nevertheless, the demands of each revolt lingered, if somewhat submerged, and would structure the public discourse over rural reform in the early twentieth century. With the global crash of capitalism in 1929, each revolt's agenda would bubble back up and demand attention once again. It was at this moment that rural reformers in each region discovered each other, realizing that their struggle was mutual.

Synthesizing two vast national historiographies, this chapter will reveal that key moments in U.S. and Mexican history – the “New South,” the Porfiriato, southern Populism, and the Mexican Revolution – might well be understood in the common context of the Caribbean basin. Historians of each nation have asked similar questions about the expansion of the plantation, enclosure movements, and popular revolt, but few have understood those processes to be playing out in a larger crucible. It is my goal within to challenge narratives of American exceptionalism by arguing that in this transformative period, the history of the U.S. South shared far more with the plantation republics of Latin America – particularly Mexico – than it did with the rest of the United States. If recent work in transnational history has successfully demonstrated that the history of the early twentieth-century urban American northeast shared much with Western Europe, then I argue below that the same was true for the rural U.S. South and similar plantation societies in the Caribbean and Latin America.³

I am certainly not the first to place the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century history of the American South in comparative or transnational perspective. Particularly emphasizing race, blackness, and the consequences of emancipation, a host of scholars have explored the similarities, differences, and dialogues between the U.S. South and other post-slavery societies in the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds.⁴ But because of their

³ On the connections between urban life and reform in the U.S. and Western Europe, see, most notably, Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴ A full list of works in this vein would be too long to include here, but some especially notable examples are George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), John Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), and Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T.*

rigid emphasis on communities of the African diaspora, those scholars often excluded Mexico, with its less obvious African heritage, from such comparisons. If historians were to look at race beyond the white/black binary, and were they to expand their analysis to agrarian class relations in rural spaces, they would likely realize that Mexico provides as compelling of a counterpoint to the U.S. South as Cuba, Haiti, or Brazil.⁵ It is my goal in this chapter, as well as those that follow, to integrate Mexico into these transnational and comparative Caribbean frameworks from which it has long been excluded.

While the bulk of this chapter will engage in a comparative historical and historiographical analysis, in exploring the aftermath of rural revolt in the American South I will also briefly introduce the Rockefeller philanthropies and their first campaign of agrarian uplift, waged in the American South between 1903 and 1914. The architects of that campaign understood it as a direct response to the Populist political turmoil of the years that preceded it, and it also reflected the desire of a new generation of Progressive social planners to use seemingly apolitical, scientific methods as a solution to age-old problems of poverty and inequality. As following chapters will make clear, these early campaigns in the American South would provide the blueprint for the global Green Revolution later in the twentieth century.

Because the five chapters that follow this one emphasize historical dialogues between the American South and Mexico rather than detached comparisons, a disclaimer on this introductory chapter is required. More than any other part of the dissertation, this chapter does not take into consideration the ways that historical actors themselves used

Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁵ The notable exception here is Sarah E. Cornell, "Americans in the U.S. South and Mexico: A Transnational History of Race, Slavery, and Freedom, 1810-1910," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2008), though only the dissertation's epilogue grapples seriously with the post-emancipation period.

cosmopolitan comparisons to structure their lives. In other words, I am not arguing that the Plan de Ayala was born from the Ocala Demands, to give just one example. Rather than relying on primary sources, the chapter overwhelmingly tells its story from secondary literature; rather than a transnational history, it is a comparative study, with all the disadvantages that such an approach brings. Yet with all that said, the rewards of such an approach outweigh the risks. The deep and largely unexamined commonalities between U.S. and Mexican history and historiography in the turn-of-the-century period are so striking that they deserve detailed examination. Likewise, a broad, sweeping account of shared rural transformations in this earlier period helps us understand how and why agrarian reformers in each region came to discover each other in the years after the financial crash of 1929.

The New South and the Porfiriato

The middle decades of the nineteenth century brought utter chaos to both the American South and Mexico. While each region had a notably violent history, the years from 1848 to 1876 in Mexico and 1860 to 1877 in the U.S. South were each exceptional in their dramatic social disruptions, warfare, and turmoil. Each region was invaded militarily: in Mexico, the late 1840s brought war with the United States and the loss of more than half of the nation's territory; the 1860s ushered in a French imperial experiment and a bloody civil war between Mexican liberals and conservatives that ultimately expelled the French but left the nation in ruins. In the American South, the Civil War of 1861 to 1865 destroyed the system of slavery, which had been the region's economic and social foundation. Like Mexico, the Confederacy was invaded by its

northern enemy, and the occupation destroyed much of the region's agricultural and industrial base. When the American South and Mexico emerged from the martial turmoil of the mid-nineteenth century, their cities and countrysides lay in ruin. But if the smoke of the battlefield was beginning to clear, the questions raised by the American Civil War and the Mexican political struggles of the 1860s lingered and demanded attention. What would be the place of the freedmen in the plantation South, and how would their demands for independence and freedom coexist with desires for economic reconstruction? If Mexican liberals had triumphed against a monarchist elite, what would the bold words of "democracy" and "progress" mean to the vast rural masses of the nation?

Over the next generation, a new – or at least reinvented – ruling class of elites in each region sought to guide their divided, wartorn, and shattered lands toward a vision of social and economic progress that was startlingly alike. Interpreting two similar yet rarely intersecting national historiographies, this section of the chapter briefly explains how two eras of economic, political, and social restructuring – the "New South" of 1877 to 1896 and the Porfiriato of 1876 to 1910 – overlapped in their guiding visions, process, and consequences. Both were decidedly exclusive of the rural majority, and under both, the system of commercial, large-scale, export-oriented agriculture flowered and grew to unprecedented dominance. Yet the expansion of the plantation did not go unchallenged, and the following section will explore the common revolts that erupted in response to the renaissance of *latifundismo*, or large-scale landholding.

The first step in the process of stabilization after decades of turmoil in Mexico and the U.S. South came in the arena of formal politics, and the political transitions in each region occurred strikingly close to one another. In 1876, general Porfirio Díaz

overthrew Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada to take his place in the presidential palace. Originally from a Mixtec Indian family in Oaxaca, in Mexico's Pacific south, Díaz had made his name fighting in support of the nationalist liberal Benito Juárez during the 1850s and 1860s, and he justified his coup d'état against Lerdo by invoking the liberal ideologies of effective suffrage and anti-re-election. Upon taking office, however, Díaz paid little attention to the slogans that had energized his campaign against Lerdo. After giving up the presidency to a puppet leader in 1880, Díaz returned in 1884 and stayed in the presidential seat until he was evicted from it in 1910. Rather than a rigid ideologue, Díaz freely mixed various political philosophies in search of stability and economic growth. The long years of his rule – known in Mexico as the Porfiriato – were motivated by two twin goals: “order” and “progress,” as repeatedly emphasized by Díaz himself. It was not a wholly unfair characterization. Of order there would be plenty, but it was often enforced by the barrel of a rifle; likewise, Porfirian “progress” was a narrow and exclusive concept.⁶

Just months after Díaz took power in Mexico, a cadre of U.S. southern Democrats reclaimed power in the former Confederate states and successfully expelled the last remnants of the Reconstruction regime, then largely held in place by federal troops and a waning national interest. The Compromise of 1877, which allowed Republican Rutherford Hayes to take the presidency that year after a highly contested election, also brought a pledge from northern Republicans to remove the military presence from the South, symbolically returning home rule to white Democrats. Across the region, this new

⁶ On the political stabilization of Mexico in the Díaz years and the coup against Lerdo, see Paul H. Garner, *Porfirio Díaz: Profiles in Power* (New York: Longman, 2001), Laurens B. Perry, *Juárez and Díaz: Machine Politics in Mexico* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1978), and José C. Valadés, *El Porfirismo: historia de un régimen* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977).

political elite loudly declared that a “New South” had been born – one not opposed to northern industry and capital, but willing to work with it; a South not of African-American political participation and mobility as the Reconstruction era had witnessed, but of subservience and stability. Yet more than anything, the New South leadership imagined a “modernized,” diversified, and commercial southern economy, liberated by the end of slavery but firmly preserving the class and caste systems that had structured antebellum society.⁷

Díaz and the New South Democrats imagined that they faced similar problems in governance, and subscribed to strikingly analogous ideologies of economic development. Both gazed out upon landscapes profoundly diverse in their social organization. In Mexico, large cities and some parts of the countryside were closely connected to the world economy and thoroughly infused with the Euro-American modernist culture of the late nineteenth century, yet most everywhere else social relations and rural culture had changed little over the past four hundred years. Rather than a unified nation, most of Mexico in 1876 was composed of island communities largely unaware of any national identity and thoroughly unmoved by the dreams and desires of Mexico City elites. In the American South, the turmoil of the Civil War had imposed more of a regional identity than was true for national identity in Mexico, but a large yeoman class still existed on the outskirts of the plantation system and its commercial nexus, and the freed slaves largely hoped to emulate this yeoman independence by fleeing the plantation regime. Disdaining

⁷ The classic work on the ruling elite of the post-1877 South is C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), which argued that the leaders who took over the South after Reconstruction were a new class of men distinct from the antebellum planters. The historiographical wake of Woodward’s thesis was enormous and I do not hope to summarize that literature here; my understanding of the period is most influenced by James Cobb’s synthetic essay “Beyond Planters and Industrialists: A New Perspective on the New South,” *Journal of Southern History* 54, no. 1 (1988).

these “anti-modern” social forms, both Díaz and the New South political elite sought to impose order and stability upon these chaotic and segmented landscapes in hopes of making them “safe” for capitalism. In his influential work *Seeing Like a State*, political scientist James C. Scott described the way that state planners have sought to reduce the complexity of human society for the purpose of governance and economic development, forcing legibility upon societies that were inherently averse to such rigid organization. The ruling classes of post-1877 Mexico and the U.S. South were united in this desire, and approached their task in a number of similar ways.⁸

The first way that both regimes sought to erode non-capitalist forms of social organization was by closing the loopholes that had allowed people to subsist beyond the market economy. In both the U.S. South and Mexico, this amounted to an all-out war on the commons in the late nineteenth century. As soon as the Civil War had ended and African-American freedmen struggled to flee the plantation, elite white southerners grew concerned that access to communal lands would provide the former slaves with enough land and food to subsist beyond the cotton and tobacco economy. To guarantee their access to cheap and pliable labor, states across the former Confederacy passed fencing and stock laws during the 1860s and 1870s to privatize formerly public lands and restrict access to them, with considerable success. Yet it was not only blacks that were affected

⁸ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); for a brilliant application of Scott’s theory to Porfirian Mexico, and my primary guidepost for understanding the rural transformations of the period, see Raymond B. Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). On the general economic philosophy of the Porfirian elite, see Richard Weiner, *Race, Nation, and Market: Economic Culture in Porfirian Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004). For two contrasting accounts of the economic development philosophy of the New South Democrats, see Dwight B. Billings, *Planters and the Making of A “New South”: Class, Politics, and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) and Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

by such enclosures, and a large class of white yeomen who were equally resentful of the plantation saw their economic independence threatened as well.⁹

In Mexico the war on the rural commons was even more dramatic and consequential. Since the sixteenth century, there had existed a loose and informal agreement between the Spanish-owned haciendas and the largely indigenous villages across Mexico, wherein hacienda owners rarely fretted about peasant subsistence and use of communal lands as long as labor was sufficiently supplied to the hacienda. Beginning in the 1850s, however, a new generation of liberals made war upon these informal organizations of land, particularly targeting the Catholic Church as the nation's largest landowner and its clientelist relationship with indigenous communities. Díaz took these campaigns even further, believing that private landownership would stimulate agricultural development. During his rule, a legion of state- and privately-employed land surveyors criss-crossed rural Mexico, signing over communally held lands with murky, colonial-era legal titles to commercially oriented landowners. By 1910, the regime had transferred 127 million of acres of communal, idle, or unoccupied lands, representing over half of Mexico's arable farmland, into private hands.¹⁰

Hoping to open up these newly privatized lands to intensive development, both the U.S. southern and Mexican regimes courted external and foreign capital. In the American South, enterprising northern businessmen had already arrived in large numbers

⁹ On the closing of the commons in the American South, see especially Steven Hahn, "Hunting, Fishing and Foraging: Common Rights and Class Relations in the Postbellum South," *Radical History Review* 26 (1982) and Hahn's monograph, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ For a classic examination of the hacienda and its social contract in colonial Mexico, see François Chevalier, *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico: The Great Hacienda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963). On the privatization of communal lands in Mexico, see especially Craig, *Cartographic Mexico*, and Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Volume 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), especially Chapter 1. Land statistic is from William Beezley, *Mexicans in Revolution, 1910-1946: An Introduction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 4.

following the end of the Civil War, and New South Democrats looked upon these newcomers not as enemies but allies. Under the watch of the new political elite, New York, Boston, and London-based financiers invested heavily in the postbellum southern economy. Bankers, merchants, and investors from across the United States and Europe established vast new plantations, cotton mills, logging and forestry operations, and mining boom towns. The influx of capital fueled a burst of rapid industrialization and economic expansion, vast in scale when compared to similar projects of the antebellum era, and delighted the politicians and boosters who courted outside investors. But as with other extractive enclave economies around the world, little wealth was left behind as cotton, cloth, coal, and timber flowed out from the region. As historian C. Vann Woodward wrote in his classic account of the period, the South under New South Democrat rule was “confined to the worn grooves of a tributary economy,” closely resembling contemporary European colonialism in Africa and South Asia.¹¹

The penetration of external capital in Mexico was even more aggressive and obvious, particularly because the vast majority came from beyond the nation’s boundaries. It was largely American and British financiers who footed the bill for the construction of new export plantations, mills, railroads, and mines. Not surprisingly, some of the major investors in the Mexican economy were also involved in the American South at the same time. Díaz and his *científico* – “scientist” – advisers collaborated closely with these foreign economic interests, though Díaz did his best to play Britons,

¹¹ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 319; the other major work on external capital and regional economic development is Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986). For all the ink southern historians have spilled on debating the “colonial” nature of the postbellum economy, very few have seriously thought about the similarities between southern economic development and that in the now-called Global South. An exception may be found in Joseph J. Persky, *The Burden of Dependency: Colonial Themes in Southern Economic Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Frenchmen, and Americans off each other, hoping to cut the best deal for Mexico. But despite Porfirian efforts to balance extranational capital with local investment, by the turn of the century it was obvious that much of Mexico's natural wealth and land was largely the property of foreigners. The size and scale of foreign-owned dominions varied enormously. On the extreme end were gigantic holdings like American journalism magnate William Randolph Hearst's 1.2 million acre hacienda, Babícora, in the northern state of Chihuahua. More representative, however, was the comparatively modest hacienda of San Pedro Coxtocán, owned by the Texas widow Rosalie Evans in the Puebla-Tlaxcala valley of central Mexico, where she oversaw a wheat plantation staffed with local day laborers. As with the American South, the wealth generated in these extractive export-oriented enterprises largely flowed outward beyond Mexico, and was rarely shared by those whose sweat and blood had produced it.¹²

Porfirian and New South elites worshipped equally at the altar of "progress," and no technology was more symbolic of late-nineteenth-century progress than the railroad. In both regions, the railroad served as a powerful political technology that forcefully thrust rural areas into the capitalist world system, binding local harvests to distant consumers and speculative markets. When the railroad entered regions populated by independent yeomen and peasants that had for generations been peripheral to the cash and export economy, land prices skyrocketed and a muscular plantation ideology came to contend with older, mutualist social and economic relations. The U.S. southern rail

¹² Historians disagree over the levels of foreign ownership in the Porfirian Mexican economy, but I am largely convinced by works such as John Mason Hart's *Empire and Revolution: The Americans in Mexico since the Civil War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) that the level of American and British control of the Mexican economy was staggering. On the Hearst holdings in northern Mexico, see John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 47-48, and Hart, *Empire and Revolution*, 179-80. On Rosalie Evans and her hacienda, see Timothy J. Henderson, *The Worm in the Wheat: Rosalie Evans and Agrarian Struggle in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley of Mexico, 1906-1927* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

network, shattered by the Civil War, grew rapidly in the years that followed, and by 1890 nine out of ten southerners lived in counties intersected by rail. The scale of Mexico's rail expansion was less explosive, but equally revolutionary. While the advent of rail transport and travel was not inherently disadvantageous to small-scale farmers – in the American South especially, railroads provided greater mobility and a new fluid arena for the interaction of whites and blacks – their management and operation was heavily tilted toward the planter elite. Discriminatory rate policies and exclusive political networks often ensured that the railroad was the handmaiden of the bank and plantation, rather than the common farmer.¹³

Less glamorous than the railroads but of equal importance in remaking rural spaces during the late nineteenth century were merchants, credit, and debt. The commercial and capitalist revolution ushered in by the railroad and plantation pulled hundreds of thousands of formerly independent farmers into the cash economy, and once there, debt and credit proved to be a powerful form of social control. In the postbellum American South, debt had been a major factor in dispossessing the white yeomanry, transforming them from owners to renters. The freed slaves, likewise, had even less access to credit or cash after emancipation, and with all other options closed to them, they joined the former yeomen in the plantation complex. In their new position as tenants and sharecroppers, poor blacks and whites relied on local furnishing merchants for food, clothing, and agricultural implements and supplies. Their only collateral was their crop –

¹³ On the construction and importance of railroads to Porfirian Mexico, see John H. Coatsworth, *Growth against Development: The Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981), especially Chapter 6, and Teresa Van Hoy, *A Social History of Mexico's Railroads: Peons, Prisoners, and Priests* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008). On the U.S. southern case, the power of the railroads in transforming rural life is best explored in Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*. Statistic on railroad counties is from Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 9. A major recent work that examines North American railroads, briefly touching on Mexico and Canada, is Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

almost exclusively cotton, because credit was extended for few other staples – and at harvest time, tenants and croppers were unable to turn the ledger book’s red ink black. Debt carried over into the next year, and kept renters in state of bondage not unlike slavery. Declining yields on southern cotton farms also turned many poor cultivators toward the gospel of commercial fertilizer, which submerged them deeper in debt.¹⁴

A similarly uneven pattern was visible across rural Mexico, where peasants-turned-peons and day laborers in the Porfirian era were forced to feed and clothe themselves through the *tienda de raya*, the hacienda’s commissary. Especially in the regions most dominated by cash crop production, such as the henequen zones of peninsular Yucatán, the sugar plantations of central Morelos, or the northern cotton belt of La Laguna, debt proved to be the most powerful tool in extracting labor from resident populations. With no land and little time to grow food or fiber for their own subsistence, the rural underclass grew increasingly ensnared in similar relationships of debt and dependence as those common to the U.S. South. And as in the Cotton Belt, widespread illiteracy perpetuated the contractual and mathematical chicanery that kept debtors in the red.¹⁵

Thus, a generation after the political transitions of 1876 and 1877, the privatization of land, the influx of external capital, the penetration of railroads, and the

¹⁴ My understanding of debt and rural transformation in the U.S. South is largely derived from Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, and Wright, *Old South, New South*. On fertilizer and debt in the making of social dependencies, see Timothy Johnson, “Growth Industry: Unearthing the Origins of Fertilizer-Fueled Agriculture in America, 1865-1950” (forthcoming Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia), and Edward D. Melillo, “The First Green Revolution: Debt Peonage and the Making of the Nitrogen Fertilizer Trade, 1840-1930,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012).

¹⁵ Frank Tannenbaum, the early scholar of revolutionary Mexico and a key protagonist in this dissertation, was one of the first to point out the similarities between the U.S. southern and Mexican systems of debt peonage. See Frank Tannenbaum, *Ten Keys to Latin America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 165, and Frank Tannenbaum, *Peace by Revolution: An Interpretation of Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933). My interpretation of debt and hacienda labor is derived from Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Vol. 1, Chapter 3, and Henderson, *The Worm in the Wheat*, Chapter 2.

social bonds of debt wrought revolutionary consequences in the rural American South and Mexico. In both, the era marked a rapid ascendance of the cash-crop plantation in organizing rural life. In each region, elites lording over export markets could boast of “progress,” “modernization,” and a booming, globally linked economy, but the societal underbelly of that project was so sordid that even casual observers recoiled in horror. Among the rural majority that provided the labor for the plantation machine, few derived any benefit from the “progress” promoted by boosters in Atlanta or Mexico City. John Kenneth Turner, an American visiting southern Mexico in 1908, reported the “barbarous” conditions of slavery and peonage on plantations in Chiapas and Yucatán, vividly describing the misery, squalor, and want of rural Mexico. Turner was not exaggerating: in the central state of Puebla, for example, the average life expectancy for men in 1910 was a shocking twenty-five years. Likewise, when travelers through the U.S. South gazed from their railcar windows upon the sharecropper cabins that increasingly dotted the old and new plantations of the Cotton Belt, they had trouble reconciling rural reality with boosters’ flowery rhetoric.¹⁶

By the 1890s in the American South, and by the first decade of the twentieth century in Mexico, rural inequality and dispossession had become an undeniable social powder keg. Especially for those among the rural poor who could distantly remember an earlier era of independence and stability, the stark disparities of the plantation world were especially galling. In the years that followed, marginalized rural people would mobilize social movements to overturn the institutions that kept them in debt and poverty. The

¹⁶ See John Kenneth Turner, *Barbarous Mexico* (Chicago: C.H. Kerr and Company, 1911), especially Chapter VI. Statistic on life expectancy is from Henderson, *The Worm in the Wheat*, 30.

following section will examine the course and consequence of these two rural revolts in the United States and Mexico.

Southern Populism and the Mexican Revolution

While very rarely discussed together, 1880s and 1890s Populism in the American South and the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s were kindred social movements. They responded to similar rural transformations of varying scales, as described above. Both were devoted to addressing the uneven relationships and inequalities of a countryside in the throes of “modernization,” and each was characterized by a wildly diverse array of political visions and solutions that were ultimately more contradictory than cohesive. However, because of the highly diverging outcomes of each – the bang of bloody civil war in Mexico and the whimper of political defeat in the United States – historians have failed to bring these two rural movements into conversation with each other. This section of the chapter will examine the two revolts in common context, with the ultimate goal of understanding how those movements and their failures would set the stage for the transnational dialogue and comparisons of subsequent decades.

Beyond their historical similarities, the two revolts are also marked by striking historiographical conjunctions. The first generation of scholars to examine U.S. Populism and the Mexican Revolution both understood those movements as singular rather than plural: that there was “a” Mexican Revolution or “a” Populist movement to isolate and describe. Likewise, they sympathized deeply with each movement’s most radical and visionary protagonists, agreeing that both were idealistic and progressive campaigns

toward democratization and economic justice.¹⁷ While not questioning the monolithic, singular nature of the revolts, a subsequent and less optimistic generation of revisionists claimed in later years that each revolt was ultimately conservative in nature, representing little more than an anti-modern backlash in the United States or a minor, insignificant facelift among the capitalist leadership of Mexico.¹⁸ A post-revisionist generation of scholars had a doubly difficult task: to both rehabilitate the radical and emancipatory visions of each revolt while also struggling to digest the vast outpouring of state-level and regional studies that threatened the broad, national conclusions that earlier historians had drawn. Ultimately, scholars of the Mexican Revolution were more successful in accomplishing both tasks at once.¹⁹

Following these recent works that emphasize regional variation and the impossibility of a master narrative, and as a disclaimer to the comparative examination that follows, I do not claim that there ever existed two distinctive, national rural revolts that can easily be contrasted. Stretched across an enormous and vastly diverse national landscape, monolithic understandings of either American Populism or the Mexican

¹⁷ On U.S. Populism, this first school is best represented by John D. Hicks, *Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931) and C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Macmillan, 1938). On the Mexican Revolution, the first and most influential scholarly examination was Frank Tannenbaum, *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

¹⁸ The major revisionist works on each revolt are Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955) and Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, *The Great Rebellion: Mexico, 1905-1924* (New York: Norton, 1980). While not as bleak as these first two, Barton Shaw's *The Wool-Hat Boys: Georgia's Populist Party* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) was certainly revisionist in tempering Woodward's earlier claims about the role of biracial toleration in the Georgia Populist Party.

¹⁹ The major post-revisionist works on each revolt are Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) and Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*. Of those two, Alan Knight does a far better job in acknowledging regional variation and the impossibility of discussing a singular Mexican Revolution. Goodwyn's major shortcoming, despite the explanatory power and reach of his work, lies in his sometimes-myopic emphasis on southern and Great Plains farmers. The most powerful recent work that shatters Goodwyn's assertion that his Farmers' Alliance members represented the core of Populist thought is Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Postel highlights California grower cooperatives rather than Cotton Belt farmers threatened by the crop lien, and draws dramatically different conclusions about their motivations and achievements.

Revolution become “conceptually baggy [and] break,” in the words of one recent scholar of the former.²⁰ Instead, I seek to jointly explore the histories of rural revolt that occurred in regions dominated by the plantation and responded to similar patterns of dispossession and commercialization. Therefore, my understanding of Populism is exclusively focused on the U.S. Cotton Belt, where former yeomen in the post-Reconstruction era revolted against the plantation and their recent loss of independence and autonomy and were joined by former slaves. Kansas and California, while crucial sources of national Populist ideology, were so distinct from Cotton Belt Populism as to warrant their exclusion. Likewise, within Mexico I emphasize the revolutionary experiences of regions that confronted similar plantation structures, like Morelos, La Laguna, and the Yucatán peninsula.

While each movement is often remembered and understood through its major spokesmen and champions – figures like Charles Macune and Tom Watson in the U.S. South and Francisco Madero and Emiliano Zapata in Mexico – it was largely everyday forms of resistance and mobilization that made each revolt possible. In his examination of twentieth-century peasant resistance in southeast Asia, James Scott argued that when ships of state run aground, it is often due to the “political and economic barrier reefs” constructed by millions of quotidian acts of resistance and subversion.²¹ The same was true for both the rural revolts considered herein. Theoretical perspectives such as Scott’s have been deeply influential in refocusing the history of the Mexican Revolution away from generals and talking heads and toward the local motivations of common people.

²⁰ Sarah Milov, “From California to Carolina, in Search of Populism,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (2010), 346.

²¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 36.

While historians of American slavery have been equally informed by the attention to everyday, informal resistance, very few scholars of the agrarian revolt of the 1880s and 1890s have adopted such a framework. I anticipate that future accounts of southern Populism utilizing such lenses will bear significant fruit.

In contrast to the Soviet revolution of 1917, which was led by a cerebral cadre who justified their rebellion with historical metaphors and allegories, neither southern Populism nor the Mexican Revolution are remembered for producing major intellectuals who embodied the demands of the rank-and-file. That lack often prompted many opponents of each movement – and some historians – to dismiss their revolt and cry for justice as guttural, unsophisticated, and backward-looking. However, despite such stereotypes, in each social movement there were several popular figures that vocalized the frustrations of the rural masses and shifted public attention to the suffering of the countryside.

In Mexico, no one better served as a conduit for the rural discontent of the late Porfirian era than Andrés Molina Enríquez. Born in 1868, and growing up in a region of the central state of México that was devoted to the production of *pulque*, the fermented juice of the *maguey* cactus, Molina Enríquez witnessed the expansion of the *maguey* haciendas during the Porfiriato. In his eyes, the overwhelming flaw of the hacienda, aside from its role in producing and reinforcing social inequalities, was its absolute inefficiency in feeding and clothing the Mexican population. In 1909, Molina Enríquez described the social divisions of rural Mexico and the backwardness of the hacienda in *Los grandes problemas nacionales*, “The Great National Problems,” one of the most polarizing and influential books of the late Porfirian period. In it, he expounded on the immediate need

for land redistribution, breaking with other educated critics of the Porfiriato in his lack of respect for the system of private property. Uneven land distribution, he argued passionately, was the defining feature of both colonial and postcolonial Mexico, and was the nation's primary obstacle to social justice.²²

The earliest U.S. southern voices of resistance to the plantation and its relationships of debt and tenancy were heard not from the center of the plantation belt, but from its peripheries. It was on the fringes of the cotton economy, in northeastern Texas, that white farmers first began organizing cooperative institutions, such as the Farmers' Alliance, to foster autonomy from the furnishing merchants and crop lien system that they believed threatened their independence. The Texas counties that were early homes to the cooperative movement during the late 1870s and early 1880s were largely populated by migrants who had fled the cotton South, hoping to avoid the expanding plantation and its social bonds. Yet because they were not deeply enmeshed in the plantation system, their demands were largely moderate and reformist. More than anything, they wanted freer access to credit, more transparency in their negotiation with the railroads, and greater cooperation among farmers so as to avoid gluts and price drops at harvest time. Their most vocal spokesman emerged in Charles Macune, originally a midwesterner who had relocated to east-central Texas and joined the Farmers' Alliance. Throughout the early 1880s, Macune and the Farmers' Alliance built an impressive base of more than 100,000 members throughout Texas. In its first decade, the Alliance

²² Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (Mexico City: A. Carranza e Hijos, 1909); on Enríquez's life and intellectual development, see Stanley F. Shadle, *Andrés Molina Enríquez: Mexican Land Reformer of the Revolutionary Era* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994).

explicitly defined itself as apolitical, separate from the formal sphere of political negotiation, but it clearly had an agenda that engaged the traditional halls of power.²³

During the latter half of the 1880s, the reformist rhetoric and cooperative associations born on the outer edges of the Cotton Belt traveled eastward to the core southern plantation districts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas. In so doing, the moderate demands of leaders like Macune entered a social landscape that was far different from where it was first forged. In regions where land ownership and wealth was far more concentrated than in peripheral central Texas, rhetorical attacks on planters, bankers, railroads, and merchants held greater potential for social violence. In the Deep South, leaders like Georgia's Tom Watson appropriated Alliance rhetoric but charged it with a fiery righteousness born of the deep divisions of the plantation system. Watson damned the holders of the purse-strings of the southern economy and the external forces that dispossessed former yeomen. The uprising of the farmers was "not a revolt," he claimed, "it is a revolution." Cautiously, he even extended the promises of class-based cooperation to African-Americans, though often the white rank-and-file were hostile to such overtures. Indeed, those most drawn to the southern Alliance were not the most marginal farmers, but those who either owned some land or had strong memories of a former independence beyond the plantation. Those who were the deepest submerged within the plantation complex – especially African-American freedmen and the poorest whites – occupied too precarious of a position to fully engage the potential promises of farmer organization. Nevertheless, the Alliance's momentum

²³ On the early years of the Texas Farmers Alliance, see Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, Chapters 2 and 3, and Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, Chapter 9. Membership statistic is from Ayers, *Promise*, 217.

barreled forward. By 1890, the Farmers' Alliance claimed more than eight hundred thousand members across the cotton South.²⁴

In Mexico, too, it would take a rather moderate initial protest to uncork the more radical discontent seething in the countryside. In 1910, when an eighty-year old Porfirio Díaz announced his plans to seek re-election once again, a host of reformers inflamed by muckraking works like Molina Enríquez's *Los grandes problemas nacionales* targeted the presidential succession as a window of opportunity. Among several competitors, Francisco Madero, a young and wealthy landowner from the northern state of Coahuila, rose to prominence as Díaz's primary opponent. After Madero was imprisoned during the election and Díaz declared the victor, Madero and his allies led an insurrection against the dictator beginning that November. With promises of democratization and political opening, Madero rallied enough support among middle-class Mexicans to overthrow and exile Díaz in a few short months. It seemed to some that the Revolution had then accomplished its goal with little division or bloodshed, but as Madero's middle-class rhetoric of change and democracy filtered down to the rural people who had suffered the most under Díaz and his cronies, it sparked the fuse of a entirely different powder keg. In the months that followed, news of Madero's revolt provided the impetus for hundreds of

²⁴ On Watson and his early rhetoric, see Woodward, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel*, Chapters 9 and 10. Membership statistic is from Ayers, *Promise*, 220; Watson quote is from same, 271. My understanding of the popularity and significance of the Farmers' Alliance in the 1880s Deep South is the product of several key works: Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, Shaw, *The Wool-Hat Boys*, Robert McMath, *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), Connie L. Lester, *Up from the Mudsills of Hell: The Farmers' Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870 - 1915* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), William W. Rogers, *The One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama, 1865-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), Mark V. Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia, 1860-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), and James M. Beeby, *Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890-1901* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008). While each of these works draws differing conclusions about the radicalism and biracialism of the Alliance movement, the majority agree that the normative participant was a middling-to-lower class farmer who felt threatened or had recently lost land to the expanding plantations.

thousands of disfranchised and dispossessed *campesinos* – rural people – to address local grievances, re-occupying lands earlier signed away from peasant communities.²⁵

In stark contrast to Francisco Madero's middle-class reformism was Emiliano Zapata from the south-central state of Morelos. Zapata came from a lower-middling background, a horse trader rather than a day laborer or peon. Despite the mythic interpretation of Zapata as the voice of the very poorest, he was rather representative of those who rose in arms against both Díaz and then Madero. Rather than the most marginal and dependent of the rural poor, Zapata had some education and semblance of autonomy from the plantation complex. The sugar districts of Morelos, where Zapata was born, likewise, exemplified the regions that were most hospitable to rural revolt. As had been true in the American South, support and dedication to agrarian revolution was strongest in the liminal spaces where capitalist and traditional social relations coexisted and rivaled one another. In the regions where planter power was most absolute and the working poor most degraded, such as the henequen plantations of Yucatán, agrarian revolt was far slower in manifesting. But in Morelos, where rural people had recently lost land and independence or felt the threat of an encroaching plantation elite, the potential gains of open resistance outweighed the risks.²⁶

Believing that Francisco Madero would support the Morelos peasants' demand for land, Zapata rose in revolt in 1911 to support the northerner's cause against Díaz. But when Madero had taken his presidential seat in Mexico City and cautiously but consciously avoided the question of land titles and agrarian reform, Zapata refused to

²⁵ On Madero and the earliest phases of agrarian revolt, see Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Vol. 1, Chapters 3 and 4, and Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico*, Chapter 8.

²⁶ On Zapata's early career and the revolt in Morelos, see Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. On the regional variations of revolt and the importance of liminal spaces, see Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Vol. 1, Chapter 3.

demobilize his troops. When it became abundantly clear that Madero's revolution was meant for the upwardly mobile middle classes rather than disfranchised *campesinos*, Zapata broke his alliance with Madero and returned to war. In so doing, he was joined by a host of other social factions equally unhappy with Madero's compromises and moderation, including the northerners Francisco Villa from Chihuahua and Venustiano Carranza from Coahuila. Over the next few years, the seemingly bloodless coup initiated by Madero deteriorated into a vicious civil war, as a host of regional leaders battled each other for power and the future of the Revolution.

More than any other revolutionary leader, Zapata embodied the demand of the dispossessed rural masses to the land they had lost during the Porfiriato. Zapata's unwavering emphasis on land rights was immortalized in his November 1911 Plan de Ayala, issued from a village of the same name in Morelos. As the mobilizing, founding document of Mexican *agrarismo* – technically “agrarianism,” but more closely meaning the push for land redistribution – the Plan protested the “horrors of poverty” that grew from land, forests, and water being “monopolized in a few hands.” With the “immense majority” of rural Mexicans owning “no more than the land they walk on,” the Plan demanded that one-third of the land held by “landlords, *científicos*, and bosses” be expropriated and redistributed among the rural communities that had been robbed in previous generations. Though it did not call for an immediate abolition of the hacienda, the Plan sought to re-establish the balance between large-scale and small-scale landholding, and did not view the formal limitations of private property law as an insurmountable obstacle. While ultimately less radical than some of the social

movements it later inspired, the Plan de Ayala provided a blueprint for rural change that would mobilize vast support across rural Mexico.²⁷

If the Plan de Ayala formalized the demands of rural rebels in plantation Mexico, in the American South the agrarian revolt of the late nineteenth century claimed a similar founding document in 1890, put to paper when the southern Farmers' Alliance convened that December in Ocala, Florida. The meeting was a conflicted and awkward affair – notably with the conference site hosted by a fertilizer magnate – and the contrasting ideologies resulting from regional variation within the Alliance made conflict inevitable. Yet the final Ocala Demands, as they became known, clearly reflected the radicalization of Alliance philosophy since its early Texas roots. While many historians have remembered the document for its decision to avoid a formal third-party political effort and its insistence upon establishing a sub-treasury system for storing crops at harvest time, the Ocala platform also included far more aggressive appeals. Particularly, its authors demanded the abolition of national banks, who were often the perpetrators of the crop lien system that ensnared farmers and reduced their status to tenants and croppers. Yet perhaps even more important was their statement on land ownership. Ocala's Clause Four obliged "the passage of laws prohibiting alien ownership of land," a tenet that would later become a central thrust of the Mexican agrarian revolution. But even more illustrative of the Alliance's critique of the plantation complex was their demand that land held by railroads and corporations "in excess of such as is actually used and needed by them be reclaimed by the government and held for actual settlers only." Interpreted side-by-side, therefore, the Ocala Demands and the Plan de Ayala shared deep

²⁷ For a full text of the Plan de Ayala, see Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, 400-404; quotes are from 402. For the best analysis of the ideological goals of Zapata and his allies, see Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Vol. 1, 309-314.

commonalities, though the former was predictably vague about the status of private property. Nevertheless, in the months that followed, the news of the Ocala resolutions spread across the Deep South like wildfire, and served to recruit tens of thousands of new members for the Alliance.²⁸

While both were intended to mark a beginning rather than an end, the Ayala and Ocala demands would come to represent the high water-mark of radicalism in the agrarian struggle more than anything else. In both Mexico and the American South, the years that followed brought political and military defeats, co-optation, and disillusionment for those who sought an aggressive and immediate shake-up in the political economy of the countryside. Because of the sacrifices forced upon the leadership of each movement, the core demands of the radicals would largely go unfulfilled during their lifetimes. In the U.S. Cotton Belt, this failure was the product of several factors. The question of formal political engagement was particularly vexing: in the early years of the Alliance movement, its leadership chose to eschew the binary of Republican versus Democrat, and the Ocala platform reflected that decision. But when membership grew and hopeful organizers came to imagine rapid political change on a national level, the temptations of formal politics became too great to turn down. The dilemma of party affiliation fueled a bitter internal debate, dividing the Alliance and playing a significant role in its downfall. When a third party – the People’s Party, or the Populists, as they became known – emerged in 1892, the Farmers’ Alliance was hemorrhaging membership. As had been true earlier for the Farmers’ Alliance, the Populists were

²⁸ For a full text of the Ocala Demands, see Proctor, “The National Farmers’ Alliance Convention of 1890 and Its ‘Ocala Demands;’” quotes are from 179. On the meeting and its conflicted nature, see Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, Chapter 10. On the post-Ocala surge in Alliance membership in Alabama, as one example, see Rogers, *The One-Gallused Rebellion*, Chapter IX.

divided over what to emphasize in their national platform, but a vocal minority were successful in making the main plank of the Party the unlimited coinage of silver, which promised to expand credit and rural access to it. When Party leaders on the national arena came to focus nearly obsessively on this demand, they lost many of their earlier supporters. The Democratic Party, too, co-opted several of the Populists' more moderate demands, stealing some thunder and further fracturing their coalition.²⁹

Likewise, the deep-seated culture of individualism and bootstrap self-help that southern farmers inherited from the American yeoman ideal precluded the sorts of communal, class-based organizations that Emiliano Zapata championed in Mexico. Private property, sacrosanct to the agrarian ethos of much of the United States, would not be violated even in the regions most bitterly divided. Additionally, that the most marginal farmers were largely non-participants in the southern agrarian revolt would limit its attack on the social and economic bonds of the plantation. Smallholders simply had too much to lose to confront the planters head-on. But perhaps the greatest stumbling block of all to the political agenda proposed at Ocala and beyond was white racism and the exclusion of African-American farmers. Despite the cautious rhetoric of leaders like Tom Watson, many southern white participants in the Farmers' Alliance and People's Party were distrustful of their black neighbors, seeing them as both economic and political threats. Therefore, when southern Democratic opponents of the Alliance and Populists employed race-baiting tactics to divide the agrarian rebels, the already-visible racial fault lines broke open easily.³⁰

²⁹ On the slow decline of the Alliance and the political missteps of the Populists, see Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, Chapter 11, and Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, Chapters XIII to XVI.

³⁰ For the best illustration of the weakness of the Alliance and Populists to address the divisions of race, see Shaw, *The Wool-Hat Boys*, and Beeby, *Revolt of the Tar-Heels*.

In Mexico, too, Zapata and his allies faced a deeply resistant planter class and the political ambivalence of the nascent revolutionary elite. After the bloody civil wars of 1911 to 1917, those who emerged as the military victors were overwhelmingly from the northern states, where rural conditions were quite different from the plantation world of Morelos. Predictably, those leaders – men like Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón – were far less committed to a program of sweeping agrarian redistribution. While more devoted to social reform than Madero, their primary goal lay with forging a modern, urban, and secular nation, rather than appeasing the peasantry. In their eyes, the two leaders who most represented the strivings of the rural masses – Zapata and Pancho Villa – also represented the gravest threat to future stability and economic modernization. During the later years of the 1910s, the Mexico City leadership did their best to marginalize both of these opponents, relying on both the carrot and the stick. Villa was bribed into political withdrawal, and then assassinated in 1923, under orders from Obregón. In spite of military setbacks, Zapata continued to mount resistance from his base in the mountains of Morelos, but in April 1919 he was lured into negotiations with Carranza's troops and shot.³¹

Despite the military defeats suffered by the *agrarista* cause, Zapata and his Plan de Ayala had struck a deep chord among Mexico's rural masses, and the slogan of "land and liberty" echoed far beyond Morelos. Even as the middle-class revolutionary leadership tried persistently to bury these agrarian demands, they were unable to do so. In late 1916, when Venustiano Carranza and his allies convened in the central state of Querétaro to write a new revolutionary constitution, the "First Chief" of the North had

³¹ On Villa and Obregón's role in his assassination, see Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); on Zapata's downfall, see Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, Chapter X.

little interest in implementing sweeping social reforms, and supporters of Zapata and Villa were formally excluded from the drafting process. But Carranza's allies worried that peace and stability would be impossible without addressing, at least to some degree, the strivings of the rural disfranchised and dispossessed. Over the course of several weeks in Querétaro, the constitutional delegates largely scrapped Carranza's reformist, liberal suggestions and drafted a strikingly radical document. The blueprint of the Mexican state that emerged in early 1917 was one that was more aggressive on questions of social and economic justice than perhaps any other in the Western Hemisphere. In various articles, labor was given the right to organize and bargain collectively; indigenous people were recognized as key contributors to the nation's past and present; the Catholic Church was severely restricted in its role as educator and landlord; and the state was given the duty of ensuring economic balance by regulating and limiting monopolies.³²

To the rural rebels, though, one article was more important than any other: Article 27, which stated that all land and sub-soil wealth in the nation was formally the property of the state, which had the power to transfer that ownership should it lie in the public good. Extranational interests, too, were restricted from owning more than a certain amount of Mexican land. As a blueprint for future land reform, the Constitution designated the *ejido* as the primary unit of rural redistribution. *Ejidors* were a crucial ingredient in *agrarismo*, and require some explanation. Meaning "village commons" in Spanish, in Mexico the *ejido* referred to communally held, inalienable plots of land that had been common in pre-Colombian society, but had gradually been eroded as the Spanish Empire and then the liberals and Porfirians had promoted capitalist agriculture. In its refashioned revolutionary guise, the *ejido* was a state-deeded land grant, but rather

³² On the framing of the Constitution of 1917, see Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico*, 328-333.

than the equivalent of private property, *ejido* lands could not be mortgaged or sold by its lessees. In revolutionary intellectual circles, there existed a great deal of disagreement over what the *ejido* represented. To Andrés Molina Enríquez, whose writings would play a significant role in laying the framework for legal redistribution, the *ejido* was solely intended as a temporary transition to small-scale, private individual ownership not dissimilar from the yeoman ideal of the United States. Others, however, drawing on the more communalist indigenous cultures of central Mexico, saw the *ejido* as a permanent institution that would serve as the basis for communal holding and cultivation. The Constitution's invocation of the *ejido*, however, was intentionally vague, in large part because some of its drafters never expected it to represent anything more than words on paper.³³

Carranza was one of those disbelievers, who came to see the Constitution of 1917 as an unwanted but necessary compromise in pursuit of stability. His successors, Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, did not depart significantly from this basic conclusion. Just as the U.S. Democratic Party had co-opted Farmers' Alliance and Populist demands to defuse a dangerous political challenge, the nascent Mexican revolutionary state paid lip service to the Plan de Ayala and its supporters, but was not prepared to realize those demands with any hurry. Nevertheless, words on paper can bear greater weight than anticipated, especially when they are given constitutional and legal backing. A generation later, after the financial crash of 1929, the forgotten promises of 1917 would haunt the federal leadership that had earlier swept them under the rug.

³³ On the competing interpretations of the *ejido* and its role in early revolutionary law, see Shadle, *Andrés Molina Enríquez*, Chapters 5 and 6, Ann L. Craig, *The First Agraristas: An Oral History of a Mexican Agrarian Reform Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), Chapter 3, and Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Vol. 1, 422-3.

Thus, even in military defeat, Mexico's agrarian rebels had forced the inclusion of their agenda into the most important political document of the new revolutionary regime. In the American South, those who had targeted the plantation and its regime of dispossession had far less success in extending the life of their demands, in large part because of a series of political enclosures that followed the national Populist defeat. In the wake of the Populist Party's 1896 electoral failures, New South Democrats took rapid measures to tighten the political system so as to prevent future challenges from below. Poll taxes and literacy tests, almost universally instituted across the South during the late 1890s and early 1900s, brought an end to the political fluidity and unpredictability of an earlier era. The physical and legal separation of blacks and whites was also formalized in Jim Crow law during the very last years of the century to permanently prevent the sorts of biracial alliances that had fueled elite nightmares during the 1890s.³⁴

When the smoke and fire of agrarian revolt began to clear in Mexico and the American South – 1917 and 1896, respectively – the hacienda and plantation continued to dominate rural social organization in each region. It appeared that both rural rebellions had failed to make an immediate impact upon the status quo. But because of the varying levels of compromise that the rebels had been able to force from the ruling class, the future of agrarian discourse in each nation would be drastically different. The last section of this chapter will briefly examine how the aftermath of each plantation revolt would set the stage for the transnational conversations that would begin during the decade of the 1930s.

³⁴ For the best synthesis of the closing of the southern political and racial system after Populism, see Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, Chapters 12 and 15, as well as Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

The Aftermath of Revolt

To those who struggled for rural justice in Mexico and the American South, their defeats were sharply felt. The betrayal and murder of Emiliano Zapata, memorialized in song and verse, galvanized the *agrarista* cause and convinced many of the treason of the revolutionary elite and the impossibility of bargaining with them. Likewise, the stinging defeat of the fusion Populist-Democratic presidential ticket of William Jennings Bryan and Tom Watson in 1896 shook the foundations of both the southern and national American agrarian movements, and persuaded many of its participants of the folly of direct political action.

But if the founding leaders of each revolt recognized their campaign as a failure in its immediate aftermath, those who followed them did not. In both regions, the subsequent generation of rural reformers that carried the torch in the wake of the political and military defeats of the 1890s and 1910s believed that they shared the goals and motivations of their predecessors, even as their rhetoric and strategies departed significantly from the earlier era. This final section of the chapter examines how both the achievements and failures of southern Populism and the Mexican Revolution shaped the tone and content of rural politics in each region during the decades that followed. While I jointly address the United States and Mexico, my primary goal here is to introduce and explain the Rockefeller philanthropies' first project in rural uplift, waged between 1903 and 1914, as a response to the political demands of Populism. The cotton South of this era would serve the Rockefellers as a domestic laboratory for their later work in Mexico and beyond.

If the political struggles of the 1890s U.S. South and 1910s Mexico were marked by bold demands for political and economic redistribution of power – whether through land reform, railroad regulation, or the expansion of credit – the rural reform movements of the subsequent generation favored a professionalized rhetoric of scientific rationality. The voices of “experts” came to drown out those of common people. Agronomists and engineers, rather than the fire-breathing stump speakers and revolutionaries of the previous generation, rose to dominate the rural political discourse during the 1920s in Mexico, and from the 1900s through 1920s in the American South. Yet due to the very different outcomes of the rural revolts that preceded them, the nature of that expert-driven discourse in the U.S. South and Mexico dramatically departed from one another. Because of the lingering popularity of radical and anti-capitalist demands in rural Mexico, the “scientific” approach to agrarian politics in Mexico was far more aggressive, democratic, and potentially liberatory than the rather reactionary and technocratic brand that took root in the American South.

With the military peace and slow stabilization that followed the Mexican Constitution of 1917, the leadership of the new revolutionary state came into the hands of what historians have called the “Sonoran dynasty.” Of the decade and a half between 1920 and 1934, Sonorans sat in the presidential seat for eleven of those years. Two men in particular – Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles – came to dominate Mexican politics, and while the two differed in many respects, they shared a similar vision for Mexico’s future. Under their rule, they formalized and consolidated the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party, or PNR), which would remain in power for more than seventy years (and is again in power at the time of writing). Obregón and

Calles were undoubtedly more radical than Madero, and they pioneered the expansion of rural schools to uplift the lower classes, waged a dramatic war against the Catholic Church and popular religiosity, and supported cultural industries that championed Mexico's indigenous past. But on the question of agrarian reform, they were clearly not Zapatistas. With a leery eye toward the densely settled central Mexican states and their indigenous traditions of communalism and cooperation, the Sonorans were deeply skeptical that the *ejido* – in whatever form – might represent a path toward a more prosperous and modern rural Mexico. The problems of the countryside, in their eyes, would not be solved by *agraristas* who divided up the haciendas and plantations to create subsistence-oriented plots, but by skilled agronomists and efficient producers who would cooperate to augment production, bringing food prices down and helping Mexico become a global exporter. While Obregón and Calles supported the constitutional Article 27 in name, they had no desire to use it as a tool of social re-engineering. Land redistribution moved at a snail's pace during the 1920s, undertaken to preserve social peace rather than to remake the political economy of the countryside.³⁵

Under the Sonorans' rule, between 1920 and 1934, the radical agrarian voices of the 1910s were quietly shunted from the political spotlight and replaced by educated experts: agronomists, engineers, and other technicians. Indeed, the 1920s were a golden era in Mexican agricultural science, and careers that had previously attracted few young people grew dramatically in size during the revolutionary 1910s and the decade following it. The Escuela Nacional de Agricultura (National School of Agriculture, or ENA) had been founded in Mexico City by liberals in the middle of the nineteenth century, but

³⁵ Jürgen Buchenau is the most well-known scholar of the Sonoran dynasty; see his two biographies *The Last Caudillo: Álvaro Obregón and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2011) and *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

during the Díaz years enrollment remained low. Porfirian ENA students read the latest French manuals on scientific agriculture, but found little interest in their skills among hacienda owners who saw no reason to alter their labor-intensive formula for profit. During the revolutionary years, as the ENA rejected Eurocentric philosophies, they turned increasingly to the United States for scientific leadership. But revolutionary rhetoric and politics also seeped into the professional world. In the early 1920s, to cater to the growing number of applicants, the ENA moved from the Federal District to a recently expropriated hacienda in the surrounding state of México that had previously belonged to one of Díaz's lieutenants. In the former hacienda chapel that was converted into a secular classroom, a Diego Rivera mural announced the school's nascent revolutionary mission: "here we teach the exploitation of the soil, not the man." The marriage of technical training with revolutionary rhetoric would define the graduates of the institution.³⁶

Those who studied at the ENA after 1910 would play a dynamic role on the public stage during the 1920s, as Mexican state and society weighed the future of agrarian policy. Yet rather than a homogenous group, agronomists and engineers were torn between technocratic instincts and the social imperatives that they had imbibed in the revolutionary years. No one was more illustrative of the budding class of agrarian experts than Marte R. Gómez, a figure that would later prove crucial to the Rockefeller Foundation agricultural work in Mexico during the 1940s. Born to a middle-class family

³⁶ On the ENA and its transformation over the revolutionary era, see Michael A. Ervin, "The Art of the Possible: Agronomists, Agrarian Reform, and the Middle Politics of the Mexican Revolution, 1908 - 1934," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2002), Joseph Cotter, *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880 - 2002* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), Chapters 1 and 2, Jennifer Krzyminski Younger, "Utopía Mexicana: Diego Rivera's Program for Chapingo Chapel, 1924-1927," (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1999), and Ramón Fernández y Fernández, *Chapingo hace 50 años* (Chapingo, Mexico: Escuela Nacional de Agricultura, 1976).

in the northern state of Tamaulipas in 1896, Gómez moved to Mexico City as a teenager to begin study at the ENA in 1909. Seduced by Zapata's agrarian revolt in nearby Morelos, Gómez put his education on hold and joined the southern rural forces, and during his months with the *agraristas* he developed a sympathy for the landless peasantry that would long inform him. After returning to the ENA and earning his degree in the late 1910s, Gómez devoted his professional career to furthering the cause of dispossessed rural Mexicans, first as a surveyor for the National Agrarian Commission in the early 1920s, studying land titles in Morelos and Yucatán to aid local people in petitioning for redistribution, and then as chief of the agriculture department in his home state of Tamaulipas in 1925. Gómez saw the *ejido* as the primary medium for transforming the countryside, but had little faith in the agricultural practices of most rural people, imagining technical assistance as essential to fostering a wealthier and healthier countryside. Like others of his generation and training, he awkwardly understood himself as both an expert and a representative of the people.³⁷

Yet especially during the latter half of the 1920s, when President Calles steered hard to the right on agrarian issues, bringing land redistribution to its slowest pace since the Revolution began, those agronomists like Gómez who professed sympathies with the *agrarista* cause faced personal and political challenges. Gómez himself was forced into exile in Europe between 1930 and 1932 after running afoul of Callista supporters. Agronomists and engineers who were more eager to emphasize the technical shortcomings of Mexican agriculture, rather than its social and economic problems, often took the place of men like Gómez in those years. But in the wake of the financial crash of

³⁷ On Gómez's early career, see Michael A. Ervin, "Marte R. Gómez of Tamaulipas: Governing Agrarian Revolution," in *State Governors in the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1952: Portraits in Conflict, Courage, and Corruption*, eds. Jürgen Buchenau, and William Beezley (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

1929, Calles' alliance with larger, wealthier farmers proved to be a political liability. As the next chapter will reveal, the crisis of the 1930s brought political openings that more socially aggressive rural reformers were quick to exploit.

Mexican agrarian politics remained radical and unpredictable in the aftermath of violent insurrection, due to the compromises forced during the 1910s and the historical weight and memory of a bloody civil war. In the United States, there was no similar legacy, and in turn, the rhetoric, tone, and leadership in the debate over rural life and inequality shifted dramatically after 1896. If the Farmers' Alliance and Populist movements had been hopelessly diverse in their ideology and stratified by region, their one commonality was that they were overwhelmingly led by farmers themselves. Participants may have been forward-looking or backward-looking, open to scientific innovation or threatened by it, seduced by the market or repelled by it, but they were almost all cultivators of the land who had a close relationship with soil and toil. In the post-1896 era, those voices were forced to share the public stage with a new generation of Progressive urbanites who worried more about rural outmigration, the swelling of cities, and the logistics of agricultural prices, supply, and demand than they did about dispossession and economic exploitation. The questions and answers they posed about rural-urban relations were far different from their predecessors.

No group had more success in dominating the political spotlight on rural affairs in the post-1896 era, or was more exemplary of the retreat from radical agrarian politics, than the Country Life Movement. While the movement is largely remembered as stemming from President Theodore Roosevelt's federally appointed Country Life Commission of 1908-1909, it in fact went back to the earliest years of the decade. After

the political failure of the national Populist Party, Progressive intellectuals continued to mull over the diverse gripes and dilemmas presented before the nation in the preceding decade. Like the more radical voices within the southern Farmers' Alliance, the Progressives worried about the uneven relationship between urban consumers and rural producers, but not because of discomfort about rural exploitation – because they felt the countryside was unsuccessful in keeping pace with urban modernity. These intellectuals feared that if rural life failed to offer opportunities for growth and profit, then country people would flee for the slums of cities, contributing to urban problems. With the idealism and commitment to rational solutions that was characteristic of the era, they hoped to reinvent rural life to make it more attractive, though they rarely paused to consider rural people's opinion in the process.³⁸

This is not to say that Progressive agrarian reformers were completely deaf to the demands of their predecessors. While they did not rely upon the same fiery rhetoric as the previous generation, some of the political issues that had energized the national People's Party remained on the bargaining table during the 1900s and 1910s. Indeed, Elizabeth Sanders has argued in a widely influential book that the Progressive era's legacy of reform was largely the product of the political action of the rural voting bloc that was forged in the Populist revolt in the 1880s and 1890s. However, the sorts of measures that Sanders credits the farm bloc with pushing into law – antitrust policy, the creation of an income tax, state-funded agricultural education and extension – were largely the demands of the reformist and relatively well-to-do farmers of the West and Midwest rather than the

³⁸ For the most damning critique of the Country Life Movement and their agenda, see David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900 - 1930* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1979). For a revisionist interpretation of Roosevelt's Commission, see Scott J. Peters and Paul A. Morgan, "The Country Life Commission: Reconsidering a Milestone in American Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 78, no. 3 (2004).

Deep South. It was the cooperativists, fruit growers, and proto-agribusinessmen of places like California – the protagonists of Charles Postel’s *The Populist Vision* – that saw their agenda increasingly fulfilled during the years before World War I. Those southern agrarian rebels described earlier in this chapter who were angrily responding to the dispossession of the plantation complex, tenancy, and sharecropping found far less solace in the political victories of the Progressive era.³⁹

Those Progressive reformers who did address the poverty and inequality of the plantation South were largely drawn from the world of private philanthropy. Beginning in the 1880s, several industrial magnates from the urban northeast, notably Robert C. Ogden and George Peabody, came to develop an interest in the deepening poverty of the former Confederacy, with a particular sensitivity to the declining fates of the African-American freedmen. Founding schools in cotton districts that were hardly spending anything on public education, these early philanthropists began to foster a northern impulse to view the rural South as an exotic, backward, and even un-American place that desperately needed external aid. However, these early and halting efforts would pale in comparison to the philanthropic organizations organized by the Rockefellers, then the wealthiest family in America.⁴⁰

³⁹ Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ On the role of northern philanthropy in southern economic and educational development, as well as its place within the Progressive impulse, see Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Chapter 1, Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902-1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), James L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), and Judith Sealander, *Private Wealth and Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Reshaping of American Social Policy from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). On the northern “imperial gaze” toward the South after the turn of the century, see Natalie Ring, *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

John D. Rockefeller, Sr., had professed an evangelical commitment to giving away wealth since his first financial successes as a young man, but the seed of organized Rockefeller philanthropy was planted in the spring of 1901, as the “Millionaire’s Special” steamed down the Atlantic coastline from New York into the U.S. South. Given its name by skeptical southern newspapermen, the “Special” was a train excursion attended by the leading lights in northern philanthropy, chartered by Robert C. Ogden to inspire interest in the American South among a new generation of industrialist donors. As the train chugged southward and stopped for tours of major black and white educational institutions from the Hampton Institute in Virginia to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, its occupants both marveled and recoiled at the world before their eyes. One such traveler was twenty-seven year old John D. Rockefeller, Jr., pampered son of the Standard Oil magnate. What Junior witnessed – endless cotton fields, dilapidated schoolhouses, and sharecroppers both black and white – would guide his career in the years to come; he later recalled the trip to be “one of the outstanding events of my life.”⁴¹

In response to his son’s pleas for action, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., founded the ambiguously named General Education Board (GEB) in 1903, endowed it with one million dollars, and granted Junior leadership of the institution. While Junior provided the public face of the GEB, its intellectual engine lay in Frederick Gates, Senior’s long-time business manager and a former Baptist preacher. Far more so than Junior, Gates believed the ills of the South lay in the region’s soil and its poor cultivation, and particularly in cotton monoculture. “We are interested in the schools of the south,” Gates told fellow officers of the GEB, “but we ought to be interested chiefly in the soil of the South, which

⁴¹ Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 5; trip details are from Raymond Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 116-119.

supports the school; and so with the home, church, and community.”⁴² Before any progress could be made toward educational reform, Gates believed, the GEB must focus its efforts on “improving” southern agriculture in its organization and technique. Like others of his generation, Gates believed that science and its application could ease the social and political divisions that had earlier erupted into the Populist revolt.⁴³

Yet “improving” southern agriculture was no simple task. In approaching the question of rural poverty, Gates and his fellow GEB reformers weighed two conflicting approaches, as would later Green Revolution planners in the Global South. Some in the Rockefeller world believed that if only the yield of cotton could be raised, then the general standard of living would automatically improve. But others were skeptical of such a simplistic approach. They recognized that the region had a complicated history that needed to be reckoned with. Most southern farmers were poor, they observed, not because of low yields, but because of the social and economic ties of debt, tenancy, and the one-crop system. This wing of the GEB argued they had to get the South away from its cotton obsession, and help sharecroppers and tenants establish more secure lives. This, of course, was a much more difficult proposition than raising yields, and the GEB was divided over how to plan their war on rural poverty.⁴⁴

Seeking a blueprint for rural development, the GEB found one in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its agent Seaman A. Knapp. Knapp is a

⁴² Joseph C. Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp: Schoolmaster of American Agriculture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 215.

⁴³ Frederick Gates, *Chapters in My Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 221-3.

⁴⁴ On the contradictory visions of Gates and his peers in the General Education Board, see John W. Klein, “The Role and Impact of Rockefeller Philanthropy During the Progressive Era,” (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1980), Theodore R. Mitchell and Robert Lowe, “To Sow Contentment: Philanthropy, Scientific Agriculture, and the Making of the New South, 1906 - 1920,” *Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990), Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970), Chapter 8, and Ring, *The Problems South*, Chapter 3.

key transitional figure in U.S. agriculture, uncomfortably straddling the divide between nineteenth-century yeoman agrarianism and the emerging government-industrial-research trinity of the twentieth. Throughout his career, Knapp had championed farm demonstrations as the most efficient way to teach scientific methods to American farmers, whom he saw as inherently resistant of change. Yet unlike professors in the emerging land-grant college complex, Knapp believed that farmers would never listen to outsiders, no matter what their academic credentials. However, if a trusted neighbor could demonstrate physical results and distill scientific method into familiar vocabulary, Knapp believed that farmers would be eager to adopt more productive practices. Nevertheless, like countless other agricultural reformers who had come of age in the Midwest, Knapp was unable to fully comprehend the racial or class contours of agrarian societies distinct from his native region, such as those of the U.S. South.⁴⁵

In 1903, when the federal government haltingly began moving to prevent the spread of the cotton boll weevil insect from Mexico toward Texas and into the southeast, Knapp proclaimed that he had discovered a solution to the biological crisis that seemed to threaten American cotton culture. On a demonstration farm in Terrell, Texas, Knapp boasted of having beaten the weevil through early planting, regular cultivation, and burning cotton stalks post-harvest, and he soon found himself as the head of the USDA's effort to control the weevil's spread. Though his primary duty would be the eradication of the weevil, Knapp hoped to transform his federal appointment into an outright war

⁴⁵ For older and rather uncritical works on Knapp see Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, and O.B. Martin, *The Demonstration Work: Dr. Seaman A. Knapp's Contribution to Civilization* (Boston: Stratford, 1926). Recent studies have exposed Knapp as a more talented mythmaker than a farm demonstrator, along with finding his legacy deeply undermined by racism. See Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) and James Giesen, *Boll Weevil Blues: Cotton, Myth, and Power in the American South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

against what he saw as the major flaw of southern agriculture: “the single crop system,” which “limits knowledge, narrows citizenship, and does not foster home building.”⁴⁶ To balance the southern obsession with cotton, Knapp believed that farmers had to raise their own food crops, particularly corn. He was deeply uncomfortable with the uneven concentration of landownership that he witnessed as he followed the weevil eastward from Texas, and in targeting cotton monoculture and its economic supports of debt and tenancy his campaign potentially threatened the southern status quo.⁴⁷

In an era when the USDA and federal government were only shadows of the juggernauts they would later become, though, Knapp’s affiliation with Washington brought him little backing to wage a vast campaign. Interstate commerce laws restricted the government’s intervention to states then infested with the weevil, which meant that any reform east of the Mississippi River would have to wait. It was at this moment that Gates and the GEB initiated contact with Knapp, pledging their aid in states that had not yet received USDA funding. Beginning in 1906, GEB money sent Knapp’s agents into Mississippi, then to Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia in the year that followed, hiring and teaching local farmers to serve as demonstrators of the “Knapp method.”

The package of practices that Knapp and the GEB sought to indoctrinate among southern farmers was profoundly incoherent in its social and environmental goals. One element of the campaign sought to raise more cotton in the face of the weevil infestation,

⁴⁶ Seaman A. Knapp, “Causes of Southern Rural Conditions and the Small Farm as an Important Remedy,” *Yearbook of the USDA* (1908), 312.

⁴⁷ For an example of Knapp’s resistance to the planter elite and their social regime, see Seaman A. Knapp to Beverly Galloway, April 25, 1906, Record Group 54: Records of the Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils, and Agricultural Engineering, Entry 1, Box 30, Folder 6, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD.

with little regard to soil fertility or economic justice.⁴⁸ On the other hand, Knapp's GEB-funded agents also confronted structural issues, as embodied in their "Ten Commandments." Among the Knapp Commandments were suggestions toward a more sustainable agriculture: planting "a winter cover crop," "the judicious use of barnyard manure and legumes," and the "systematic rotation of crops," and along with an emphasis on "home production of food required for the family and for the stock." He also pushed aggressively for the cultivation of corn over cotton, as he believed that it would help southern farmers become more independent of furnishing merchants. Yet simultaneously, Knapp recommended techniques that were well beyond the reach of poorer and unlettered farmers, such as "the use of more horsepower and better machinery," "commercial fertilizers," and "keeping an accurate account of the cost of farm operations."⁴⁹

However coherent or incoherent the goals of the farm demonstration program may have been, its enduring accomplishments lay not in diversification or the elimination of southern poverty, but in the expansion of federal power. In May of 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, creating within the USDA the Cooperative Extension Service, essentially nationalizing the GEB project and expanding its work into every state in the U.S. Over the course of the twentieth century, the Extension Service aggressively championed efficiency, mechanization, and an industrial ethos for farming that ultimately reaped similar demographic effects in the American countryside as later Green Revolutions would in the Third World. Yet if Smith-Lever canonized the life and work of Seaman Knapp, for the GEB it had a rather contrary impact. As the bill was being

⁴⁸ See, for example, W.B. Mercier and H.E. Savely, *The Knapp Method of Growing Cotton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1913).

⁴⁹ General Education Board, *The General Education Board: An Account of Its Activities, 1902 - 1914* (New York: General Education Board, 1915), 29.



Figure 1.1. GEB corn demonstration in Mississippi, late 1900s or early 1910s. Knapp and the GEB championed the raising of corn for self-subsistence, as it would make farmers free of the grasp of the furnishing merchant. From *The General Education Board: An Account of its Activities, 1902-1914* (New York: GEB, 1915), 43.



Figure 1.2. GEB corn club demonstrator in South Carolina sits by his record-breaking corn yield of 1910. The visual symbolism of abundance as a product of scientific innovation would be invoked again and again during the Green Revolution of the later twentieth century. From *The General Education Board: An Account of its Activities, 1902-1914* (New York: GEB, 1915), 63.

debated before Congress, the Rockefeller family found itself at the center of a firestorm of controversy, after labor unrest at the family-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company resulted in the deaths of nineteen people in Ludlow, Colorado. Public outrage toward the family spilled over into the Smith-Lever hearings, and after it was widely publicized that the GEB had influenced and funded the demonstration work, the group was barred from any future cooperation with government programs.

Despite the ignominious end to their cooperation with the federal government, in the years after 1914 the leaders of the Rockefeller philanthropies began cultivating a myth that the Knapp campaign – and their role in it – had been crucial to reversing the downward spiral of the rural South. In their eyes, the combination of technical scientific expertise and physical demonstration was a powerful package that had begun the slow but steady task of both improving staple production and fostering independence among farmers of all stripes. As the latter half of this dissertation will demonstrate, it was that myth and legacy, along with the philanthropies' experiences working with marginal farmers in the American South, that would inspire a similar campaign by the Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico during the early 1940s, and then across the Global South in the decades that followed. Yet rather than a coherent or streamlined model, the Knapp-GEB program was contradictory in its vision for the countryside. It gave no concrete indications whether it would ultimately strengthen the cotton complex that kept so many farmers in debt and servitude, or actually weaken plantation monoculture by teaching farmers to live outside of it through better cultivation of food crops. That same dilemma would haunt the Green Revolution in Mexico and beyond.

For all its mythical inspirations, the American South was hardly “saved” during the 1910s. The GEB’s demonstration campaign did little to end either the dominance of cotton monoculture or the poverty that accompanied it. Whatever gains in diversification that had been secured during the Progressive era were rapidly lost during the years of World War I, when cotton prices spiked upward in response to wartime demands. Fields that had earlier been planted in peanuts, peaches, and corn were rapidly returned to the white fiber. Even when cotton prices plunged at war’s end, southern farmers remained bound to their staple, especially those who had borrowed heavily during the 1910s to subsidize their intensification of cotton cultivation.

Thus, when in 1923 the northern muckraking journalist Frank Tannenbaum toured the Cotton Belt to observe the changing pace of life, he was stunned by the “white plague” that continued to enslave the South. Cotton monoculture, thundered Tannenbaum, “destroys civic interest,” “fosters local political bossism,” “depletes the soil,” and perhaps most dangerously, threatens to “make of the farm an outdoor factory.” Yet Tannenbaum, who also knew a good deal about Mexico – and will emerge in the following chapters as a central protagonist – predicted that the deep levels of dependence and deprivation in the Cotton Belt might foster radicalism similar to that which he then witnessed in Mexico. Morelos and Yucatán, “the two single-crop areas” in Mexico, Tannenbaum warned readers, “had the greatest slavery and the most bitter revolution and are now the most radical.” Should the southern elite ignore the sociopolitical powder-keg they sat upon, they might face a similar explosion. Especially after the financial crash of 1929, Tannenbaum’s prediction came to have the ring of prophecy.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Frank Tannenbaum, “The Single Crop,” *Century Magazine* 106 (no. 6), October 1923, 816, 825.

In the late 1870s, both Mexico and the American South emerged from chaotic periods of war and social turmoil, shepherded by a new political elite that championed stability and economic growth above all. In the generation that followed, that leadership would wage an aggressive campaign to rationalize the social and economic complexity of the countryside in hopes of incorporating rural people and landscapes within the network of global capitalism. They were strikingly successful in doing so, and under their stewardship, the export-oriented plantation and hacienda grew and blossomed in the American South and Mexico. But if bankers, planters, boosters, and bureaucrats benefited from the new economic regime, those profits were hardly shared by the rural majority, who instead saw the last vestiges of their independence and autonomy eroded. In response, dispossessed country people rose in revolt against both regimes, with varying levels of success.

In the American South, the Farmers' Alliance challenged the New South Democratic elite and their allegiance to northern capital, but in choosing formal political avenues over violent revolt, was ultimately unable to dethrone those opponents during the 1880s and 1890s. In Mexico, a diverse group of rebels – rural and urban, middle-class and lower-class, northern, central and southern – joined together to expel their aging dictator, Porfirio Díaz, in 1910. But when those diverse forces could not agree on what would replace Díaz, the revolt deteriorated into a long and astonishingly violent civil war. When the smoke cleared, the faction that most closely represented the marginalized rural poor – the *agraristas* – were militarily defeated, but they were nonetheless able to force their demands for rural justice into the revolutionary constitution of 1917.

While neither rural revolt was successful in immediately reversing the social and economic transformations instigated by the earlier regimes of capitalist stabilization, each revolt would significantly shape the tone and content of agrarian politics in the era that followed 1896 and 1917. In Mexico, the stark memories of revolutionary violence and the lingering popular appeal of land reform would ensure that even as a new class of scientists and experts came to dominate the public spotlight on rural issues, they would marry their technocratic instincts with the radical rhetoric of martyred agrarian heroes like Emiliano Zapata. In the United States, rural rebels were successful in placing the uneven relationship between town and country on the national stage, but had not had the political clout to force their rhetoric and agenda upon the debate that followed. The groups that would pick up and carry the torch of rural reform – institutions such as the Country Life Movement – came to view agrarian problems and solutions in a rather different light than their predecessors. As the most prominent example of the Progressive era campaigns, the Rockefeller family's General Education Board took note of southern Populist concerns about rural poverty and inequality, but would seek to address social divisions through scientific, rather than political, solutions. Ultimately, they would have little success in resolving those problems.

The 1920s did not bring resolution to these lingering dilemmas, and in both regions, the decade was one of political stasis and slow economic decline in the countryside. The worldwide slide in agricultural commodity prices after World War I drew commercially oriented producers deeper into debt, and persuaded few farmers to adopt new practices in pursuit of greater profits. However, the very last few months of the decade would dramatically shatter any semblance of stasis and stability. The global

financial crash of 1929, felt jointly on both sides of the border, stretched and snapped the minimal safety nets that had suspended poor rural people during the previous decade. As crop prices and agricultural incomes spiraled downward in the first years of the 1930s, a growing number of rural people grew convinced that capitalism had utterly failed.

Seizing upon that opening, those agrarian radicals whose visions and blueprints had been most ignored and marginalized by the ruling elite after 1896 and 1917 renewed and reinvigorated their push for the political spotlight. It was at this moment that the agrarian trajectories of the American South and Mexico converged. If the lack of chronological synchronization between the Mexican Revolution and U.S. Populism – the two were separated by nearly twenty years – precluded transnational dialogue and comparison, the crash of 1929 and chaos of the early 1930s brought the countrysides of the American South and Mexico into political and chronological harmony. The following chapter will illustrate that as the political momentum in each nation edged leftward, agrarian reformers in each region came to discover their counterparts across the Gulf of Mexico.

CHAPTER 2

SHARECROPPERS AND *CAMPESINOS*: AGRARIAN COMPARISONS DURING THE NEW DEAL AND PLAN SEXENAL, 1933-1937

On October 6, 1936, the executive committee of the Liga Nacional Campesina, or National Peasant League, convened in Mexico City to draft a resolution of praise and “warmest congratulations” to a “great statesman.” Their meeting came at the height of Mexican *agrarismo*, the revolutionary movement to break up large estates and redistribute land as communal plots to small-scale cultivators, and in a year when the nationalist left-wing president Lázaro Cárdenas had substantially escalated his agrarian campaign. On this October day, however, the League had not convened to praise their patron Cárdenas. Their letter was addressed instead to United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt and “his ‘New Deal,’ which has resulted in such great benefit to the proletarian organizations in our Sister Nation.” Likely responding to FDR’s growing public interest in land reform in rural America, the League expressed their hope that “the millions of votes of our brothers of this class in the United States will result in [his] re-election.”¹ When they handed their resolution to U.S. Ambassador Josephus Daniels for transmission to Roosevelt, Daniels marveled at “how these people keep up with what is

¹ Executive Committee of the Liga Nacional Campesina to Josephus Daniels, October 6, 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, President’s Personal File (hereafter PPF) 86, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY (hereafter FDRL). “Peasant” is not a perfect translation of *campesino*, which was born of a Latin American context rather than a European one, but I will use it here for the sake of simplicity. Throughout the dissertation, translations are those of the author, unless otherwise noted.

going on in the world and feel that they are a part of all movements to the enlargement of the prosperity of the long forgotten man.”²

If Mexican revolutionary organizations and peasant activists were well aware of political developments to the north, reformers in the United States also kept a close and inquisitive eye on the Mexican Revolution’s aftermath in the 1930s. Within Roosevelt’s New Deal administration, it was particularly the reform-minded agrarian liberals within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that drew the most frequent comparisons between American rural problems and Mexico’s experimental political solutions. In the summer of 1937, as the USDA began an unprecedented campaign of land reform through the Farm Security Administration, Rexford Tugwell, one of Roosevelt’s top advisers on agriculture and rural life, wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace on the value of Mexican models for U.S. politics. “I have been much impressed with the way in which Cárdenas has tackled the agrarian problem in Mexico,” gushed Tugwell. “He has very serious opposition, but is going ahead with the establishment of communal farms... I think we should keep a close watch on this process for the lessons we may learn. Is there any way of setting up a serious study of it by Department experts so that we may have the benefit of the experience?”³

It may seem unexpected that a league of revolutionary Mexican peasants and an American “Brain Trust” economist imagined that they shared a common mission. Yet their perception of a shared project was not simply imaginary. From the mid-1930s through the end of World War II, the U.S. and Mexican federal governments both waged

² Josephus Daniels diary entry, October 10, 1936, Josephus Daniels papers, Diaries, Reel 6, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, DC (hereafter LoC).

³ Rexford Tugwell to Henry A. Wallace, August 31, 1937, Finding Aid PI-118, Entry 1, Box 6, Folder AD-070-Mexico, Record Group (hereafter RG) 96: Records of the Farmers Home Administration and its Predecessors, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD (hereafter NA).

broad and sweeping campaigns to transform the political economy of their respective countrysides. In the United States, the most socially aggressive wing of the rural New Deal targeted the plantation zones of the American South, whose inequality of wealth they deemed as the nation's "number one" economic problem. In Mexico it was a broader national project that was born of the unfulfilled promises of the Mexican Revolution. Despite the very different contexts and outcomes of those two rural reform programs, this chapter and the next will argue that both campaigns might have evolved in different ways had they not been forged in a common crucible. Rather than separate, discrete political movements that can be understood in solely national contexts, the Mexican and U.S. rural reform movements of the long 1930s were closely interwoven, conscious of each other, and codependent. Their interaction with one another, particularly in the Americans' observations of Mexico, would broaden their respective visions of a more just countryside.

Applying a transnational framework to the study of the 1930s forces us to revise much of our thinking about the radical potential of the New Deal, the stabilization of the Mexican Revolution, and U.S.-Mexican relations. While scholars have agreed that the economic crash of 1929 ushered in a global spike in nationalism, they have ignored how deeply cosmopolitan those programs of national reform could be. The New Deal and the Mexican Plan Sexenal (Lázaro Cárdenas' Six-Year Plan of 1934-40) indeed turned inward to emphasize domestic problems, but they never lost sight of the global connections that linked activist governments in an era of economic crisis. Internationalist nationalisms may seem an oxymoron to some, but this chapter will argue that such a concept made much sense to actors of the time. Likewise, for those who study the uneven

relationship between the United States and Mexico, the 1930s deserve special emphasis as a moment when traditional patterns of influence and intellectual transfer were deeply upset. Where Mexico had previously (and would again later) serve the United States predominantly as a supplier of low-cost labor and raw materials, the 1930s represent a significant departure when the flow of political strategies, rather than that of farmhands and tomatoes, marked the South-North transfer between the two neighbors.

While it seemed self-evident to many U.S. and Mexican actors in the 1930s that they operated in a common world, historians have been far slower to rediscover the transnational dialogues of the era. The major scholarly works on both the rural New Deal⁴ and agrarian redistribution under Lázaro Cárdenas⁵ adopt strictly national frameworks, and if they look to external influence, their main emphasis has been on

⁴ On the rural New Deal, classic works such as Theodore Saloutos's *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982), Richard S. Kirkendall's *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), Sidney Baldwin's *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), and David Eugene Conrad's *Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), along with more recent studies, such as Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Jess Gilbert, "Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal: A Different Kind of State," in *Fighting for the Farm: Rural America Transformed*, ed. Jane Adams (Philadelphia, 2003), Dona Brown, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), and Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001) each depict the origins of New Deal rural development programs within a national perspective that excludes foreign influence and exchange.

⁵ The major works on Cárdenas' land redistribution program of the 1930s has likewise been cast overwhelmingly within a Mexican national frame, within both the revisionist and post-revisionist schools of historiography. See for example Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), Arnaldo Córdova, *La política de masas del cardenismo* (México, D.F.: Editorial Era, 1974), Ann L. Craig, *The First Agraristas: An Oral History of a Mexican Agrarian Reform Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), Adrian Bantjes, *As if Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1998), Christopher Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994), and Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

Europe and the Soviet Union.⁶ Likewise, historians of U.S.-Mexican relations in the period have emphasized the formal negotiations of diplomats and international disputes such as the legal battle over Mexico's oil nationalization, rather than examining non-state actors and how the domestic politics of each nation influenced those of its neighbor.⁷ However, there are encouraging signs that scholars are beginning to think beyond the nation in their analysis of rural reform in this critical era. A handful of essays have explored, in comparative terms, how Mexican and American approaches toward ending rural poverty in the 1930s shared common goals but differed in their prescriptions.⁸ Likewise, recent work in U.S. history has emphasized the global consequences of the New Deal, by tracing how rural experts took their agenda into the nascent Third World after they were marginalized at home.⁹ However, none of those works have highlighted the transnational crucible in which those programs themselves were forged.

⁶ On the case of the United States, though it is not predominantly focused on rural affairs, see Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). On Mexico, see especially Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

⁷ Some examples of traditional diplomatic histories of the period are Friedrich Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) and Stephen R. Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1945* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 1995). Three notable exceptions to diplomatic history's traditionally narrow focus are Helen Delpar's *The Enormous Vogue of All Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), which analyzes the dialogue between non-state actors in the U.S. and Mexico but does so primarily in the spheres of art and literature, Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, "Stereophonic Social Modernisms: Social Science between Mexico and the United States, 1880s-1930s," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999), and John Dwyer's groundbreaking *The Agrarian Dispute: The Expropriation of American-Owned Rural Land in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), which explores how U.S. agrarian sympathies enabled Mexican land redistribution but does not attempt to explain how Mexican examples inspired U.S. policies in the same period.

⁸ Two essays stand out in particular: Warren C. Whately's "Ejido or Private Property: Mexican and American Ways out of Rural Backwardness," and Roger L. Ransom and Kerry Ann Odell's "Land and Credit: Some Historical Parallels between Mexico and the American South," both published in *Agricultural History* 60, no. 1 (1986). While both fall victim to the major flaw of comparative historians – that is, not acknowledging exchange and influence between their units of comparison – I believe these two essays were ahead of their time, in some ways anticipating the turn to transnational approaches that would begin in the following years.

⁹ See, for example, Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, especially her epilogue, and David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton

In integrating cosmopolitan perspectives and transnational influences into American agrarian politics during the 1930s, I am particularly emphasizing their impact on the creation and operation of one crucial agency – the Farm Security Administration – rather than attempting to claim that the entire rural New Deal was radicalized by bureaucrats’ gaze toward Mexico. Indeed, it makes little sense to speak of a singular New Deal in agriculture, as it was a deeply conflicted and contradictory project that was torn by competing voices and visions. Most of the New Deal agricultural legislation that survived World War II is rather conservative, such as the subsidy program for staple crops, and is hardly characterized by a drive to remake the social fabric of the countryside. But nevertheless, since the 1930s historians have struggled to make sense of how socially aggressive rural agencies – particularly the Farm Security Administration, which represented the American government’s only land reform program of the twentieth century – were born in the same New Deal political environment and managed to thrive for several years. Agencies such as the Farm Security Administration departed from the centrist New Deal precisely because of their engagement with more radical programs beyond America’s national borders, particularly in Mexico.

This chapter will analyze the exchange of political models and strategies between U.S. and Mexican rural reformers during the formative years (1933 – 1937) of the New Deal and the Plan Sexenal, America’s and Mexico’s national – yet internationalist – reform movements of the 1930s. First, I will examine how the agrarian sympathies of one well-placed southerner, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Josephus Daniels, would decisively

University Press, 2010), and Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), along with forthcoming works by Daniel Immerwahr on community development in the Third World and Clifford Kuhn on the global career of southern New Dealer Arthur Raper.

revise the U.S. government's diplomatic stance on Mexican land reform in 1933 and 1934 and ultimately facilitate the Mexican state's large-scale redistribution campaigns later in the decade. Secondly, I will examine how a cadre of left-leaning U.S. reformers, led by the globe-trotting academic Frank Tannenbaum, attempted in 1934 and 1935 to translate the ideals of Mexican *agrarismo* into political action for the U.S. South, ultimately giving birth to one of the most ambitious federal agencies of the decade. Because of its chronological focus, this chapter will emphasize U.S. actors interpreting Mexican models, rather than vice versa. In these earlier years of the 1930s, the New Deal was incoherent in its attack on rural poverty, while the Mexican Revolution's approach to land reform was nearly twenty years old and had already aroused global interest. Chapter Three, which examines the peak of the U.S.-Mexican dialogue in the late 1930s and the early 1940s, reveals that the conversation became far more balanced later on.

Reading Mexico through a U.S. Southern Lens: The Education of Josephus Daniels

The collapse of international markets that began in 1929 was felt deeply across the globe. In the United States and Mexico, as elsewhere around the planet, the perceived failure of world capitalism reshaped national political landscapes as states turned inward to grapple with a changed economic order. The economic downturn in Mexico weakened elites who had long depended upon global markets to sustain their wealth, particularly large land-owners growing crops for export to the United States and Europe. Likewise, the more conservative leaders of the 1920s, who had sought to remake Mexican economic and social policy in the pursuit of Euro-American industrial modernity, saw their political fortunes crumble as their model societies did. Mexican political groups that

had been excluded from formal power for more than a decade – socialists, agrarians, labor leaders – therefore viewed the crisis of the early 1930s as a novel opening. Hoping to transform the economic crash and subsequent social ferment into an inversion of the political order, left-leaning activists reinvigorated their push for alliances across classes and regions. The successful candidacy of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934, to be discussed later in this chapter, therefore grew out of international economic trends as well as the shifting national tides of the Mexican Revolution.

In the rural United States, the Depression hit even harder than in Mexico, due to the closer market relations of nearly all farmers, wealthy and poor. No region was more blighted by the financial crisis than the American South, where farmers had already sat upon a precipice, and plummeting cotton prices and drought wrought nearly apocalyptic conditions. Black and white sharecroppers and tenants who had lived on the brink of subsistence during the lean 1920s suddenly saw even those meager livelihoods disappear. Evangelical churches were the first to assuage the human flotsam, but those who did not find answers in the church turned to new radical voices arising in the countryside. Groups such as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, founded in Arkansas in 1934 in an attempt to organize black and white landless farmers against planters and their allies in government, both surprised and frightened those who had not seen such levels of political radicalism in the South for more than a generation. Countless observers anticipated social revolution in rural America, especially in the South, as the nation seemed to approach the boil-over point.¹⁰

¹⁰ On the immediate consequences of the crash in the rural South, see Allison Collis Greene, "No Depression in Heaven: Religion and Economic Crisis in Memphis and the Delta, 1929-1941" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2010). On the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, see Donald Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant*

No politician benefited more from the chaos and discontent of the early 1930s than Franklin D. Roosevelt, who utilized the financial crisis to secure his U.S. presidential victory in November 1932. In the first year of his administration, Roosevelt and his advisers experimented with a bewildering set of solutions to the economic crisis, infuriating his critics but encouraging his many supporters. One political choice made by Roosevelt was especially surprising and unorthodox: his selection of the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, a seventy-one-year old newspaper editor from Raleigh, North Carolina named Josephus Daniels. Daniels and Roosevelt had a long personal and political relationship. Under President Woodrow Wilson (1913-21), Daniels had been appointed the Secretary of the Navy, and made his Assistant Secretary a young Franklin Roosevelt – the first government post for the New Yorker. In the 1920s, Daniels served as a sort of political mentor for his former assistant, schooling him in the ways of the southern Democratic Party. While never a candidate for office, Daniels was a key opinion-maker in the South, and the newspaper that he had edited since the 1880s, the *Raleigh News and Observer*, was the largest and most influential in his state. The *News and Observer*'s steadfast support for Roosevelt in the North Carolina Democratic primary and later election had also placed Daniels in Roosevelt's political debt.¹¹

Nevertheless, the choice of Daniels for the Mexican post was an odd one for two reasons: first, he had no diplomatic experience, making him an outsider to most of the career diplomats in the State Department. He also spoke no Spanish and probably knew

Farmers' Union and the New Deal (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) and Jason Manthorne, "The View from the Cotton: Reconsidering the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *Agricultural History* 84, no. 1 (2010).

¹¹ On the early relationship of Daniels and Roosevelt, see E. David Cronon, "A Southern Progressive Looks at the New Deal," *Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 2 (1958) and Joseph L. Morrison, *Josephus Daniels: The Small-D Democrat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966).



Figure 2.1. Franklin Roosevelt and Josephus Daniels in the United States, 1940. The two men were long-time friends and political allies, which ensured that Daniels would have an influence on the President beyond most diplomats (FDR papers, Photographs, NPx 72-18:5)

very little about Mexico. Cordell Hull, a moderate Tennessean and Roosevelt's new Secretary of State, distrusted Daniels from the start. Yet even more problematic was Daniels' former appointment as the Secretary of the Navy during World War I, when he had overseen the American invasion of Veracruz in 1914. In post-revolutionary Mexico, the memory of Veracruz loomed large in the public imagination as the worst example of imperial Yankee intervention, and the news of Daniels' selection as Ambassador spurred a violent uproar among left-wing groups and the Mexican press. One student group declared that since Daniels had "violated the national sovereignty and honor" of Mexico, his appointment was an insult to the Mexican people.¹² Roosevelt too received hundreds

¹² The Confederación Nacional de Estudiantes to Josephus Daniels, April 15, 1933, Clasificación Topográfica 24-1-8, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (hereafter AHSRE), Mexico City.

of letters from across the political spectrum urging him to recall Daniels. Roosevelt, however, assured them that his decision would remain unchanged.¹³

In the weeks before leaving for Mexico City, Daniels traveled to Washington to begin his education in Mexican history, politics, and culture. If this was the first time that Daniels was learning of the rural struggle in Mexico, he was nevertheless no stranger to the politics of agrarian revolt, as he himself had been a major figure in the Populist movement in North Carolina. Throughout the 1880s, Daniels had pushed to expand rural, agricultural education to marginal farmers in the state, though he fiercely resisted such education for black North Carolinians. While he was deeply sympathetic to the Farmers' Alliance and its early push to organize white southern farmers, when North Carolina Populists began leaning toward a biracial, bipartisan "fusion" movement with the Republican Party, Daniels became one of the Fusionists' foremost opponents. Daniels is best known to U.S. southern historians for his role in the white supremacist backlash that resulted in the Wilmington, N.C., race riot of 1898, as documented by Glenda Gilmore. From his position as editor of the *Democratic News and Observer*, Daniels fanned the flames of racial distrust by publishing incendiary articles on black male sexual exploitation of white women. In the violence that ensued, the Fusionist movement was defeated, and the Democrats consequently disfranchised blacks and poor whites to avoid future challenges from below. Nevertheless, in the decades to come, Daniels fretted about the expansion of farm tenancy and the financial decline of the Cotton Belt, and continued to support programs of rural uplift. However, in the wake of the Populist defeat, he did so

¹³ On the Mexican reaction to Daniels' appointment, see E. David Cronon, *Josephus Daniels in Mexico* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), and Daniels' personal account in his memoir *Shirt-Sleeve Diplomat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947).

through depoliticized, “expert” programs such as Seaman Knapp and the Rockefeller philanthropies’ extension campaign, as explained in Chapter One.¹⁴

With his contradictory background, it is difficult to guess at how Daniels interpreted the Mexican agrarian struggle in early 1933. However, it is likely that the formal education he received in the State Department was rather unsympathetic to the plight of the Mexican *campesino*. While Roosevelt was anxious to adopt a new stance toward Latin America through his much-publicized “Good Neighbor Policy,” most of the State Department diplomatic staff were remnants of an earlier era, and were more eager to collect outstanding American debts than to romanticize peasant activists.¹⁵ But Daniels would not receive his education in the State Department alone. In March of 1933, just weeks before Daniels departed for Mexico, his long-time friend George Foster Peabody wrote to him suggesting that he meet with a young scholar, Frank Tannenbaum, to discuss the situation in Mexico.¹⁶ Peabody himself was a fascinating character: born in Columbus, Georgia in 1852, he had moved to New York City after the Civil War and made millions investing in Mexican banking and railroad interests during the Díaz years. By the outbreak of the Revolution, Peabody had withdrawn from business and entered the world of U.S. southern philanthropy, notably as treasurer of John D. Rockefeller’s General Education Board (see Chapter One) and also through independent gifts to black institutions such as the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes. During the 1910s and 1920s he

¹⁴ On North Carolina Populism and the Wilmington riot, see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), and James Beeby, *Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890-1901* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

¹⁵ On the political climate of the State Department in 1933, see Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt*, Cronon, *Josephus Daniels in Mexico*, and Frederick Pike, *FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy: Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

¹⁶ George Foster Peabody to Frank Tannenbaum, March 20, 1933, Frank Tannenbaum papers, Series II, Box 4, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY (hereafter FTP).

would become a gentle, internal voice of criticism for the region, genuinely interested in the welfare of blacks and poor whites but always a gradualist in his solutions.¹⁷

In 1922, Peabody had met Frank Tannenbaum, who was then in his late twenties and writing an exposé of U.S. southern mill villages and cotton monocropping that would later be published as *Darker Phases of the South*.¹⁸ Their friendship, which lasted from their meeting until Peabody's death in 1938, was a rather unlikely one, given Tannenbaum's unique background and radical politics. Born into a Jewish family in Austria in 1893, he had emigrated with his parents to rural Massachusetts at the turn of the century, ultimately settling in New York City by 1906. Early in the next decade, Tannenbaum became enmeshed in workers' movements and grew to be a close confidante of Emma Goldman, eventually being jailed for leading an "army of the unemployed" into New York's churches demanding subsistence. After briefly serving in the U.S. Army during the First World War and being stationed in South Carolina, Tannenbaum grew fascinated with the American South, viewing it as a feudalistic society that seemed entirely at odds with the urban and industrial world he had come to know in New York City. Yet his interest in the U.S. South would soon be eclipsed by a passion for Mexico, a country that he first visited in 1922. That same year, Tannenbaum applied for a graduate scholarship at Amherst College in Massachusetts to do a comparative study of the American South and Mexico, two regions he believed shared the common problems of feudalism and uneven land tenure. It is unclear whether Amherst decided to

¹⁷ On Peabody's Mexican investments, see Hart, *Empire and Revolution*, 40, 52, 128, and 137-8, and on his philanthropic activities, Louise Ware, *George Foster Peabody: Banker, Philanthropist, Publicist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951).

¹⁸ Frank Tannenbaum, *Darker Phases of the South* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1924). Most of the chapters of the book were first published in *Century Magazine* between April and December 1923.

fund Tannenbaum, but nevertheless he enrolled in the Robert Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. in 1924 to begin his graduate work.¹⁹

At Brookings, Tannenbaum undertook a broad education in history, political economy, and sociology. Torn between his many diverse interests – the U.S. South, labor movements, prisons and penal reform – Tannenbaum chose to write his doctoral thesis on the Mexican Revolution, with a focus on *agrarismo* and land redistribution. His research took him on mule-back across rural Mexico in the mid-1920s, into state, federal, and regional archives, and brought him into close acquaintance with a number of political



Figure 2.2. Frank Tannenbaum researching his dissertation in rural Mexico, 1920s. Unlike most American visitors in the revolutionary period, who confined themselves to Mexico City, Tannenbaum explored vast reaches of rural Mexico, and his witnessing of agrarian inequality converted him into a firm supporter of the land reform project. (Tannenbaum papers, Series VII, Folder 3)

¹⁹ Tannenbaum is best known as a historian, and the most famous of his works is the classic comparative study *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Knopf, 1947). Several essays have detailed Tannenbaum's career from a number of angles, as either an activist or scholar, but none have fully captured his fascination with the U.S. South or his transnational political activities. For the best analyses of his life and scholarship, see Helen Delpar, "Frank Tannenbaum: The Making of a Mexicanist, 1914-1933," *The Americas* 45, no. 2 (1988), Cowie, "The Emergence of Alternative Views of Latin America," Virginia S. Williams, *Radical Journalists, Generalist Intellectuals, and U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 2001), and Alan Knight, "Frank Tannenbaum and the Mexican Revolution," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 77, (Spring 2010). On Tannenbaum's application to Amherst College, see W.H. Hamilton to Frank Tannenbaum, November 22, 1922, Series II, Box 3, FTP.

elites in the nascent Partido Nacional Revolucionario. Throughout the writing and editing process, Tannenbaum sent chapters of the dissertation to his friend Peabody, who shared his sympathetic views of Mexico and had even collaborated with Tannenbaum to bring the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio to the American South in 1924 for a tour of Hampton and Tuskegee. Published in 1929 as *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution*, Tannenbaum's dissertation was the first scholarly examination of the revolt against Porfirio Díaz. Beneath the myriad charts and tables that filled the book lay a rather simple thesis: the Mexican Revolution was a struggle of oppressed peasants for social justice, it was "democratic and popular," and it "has freed approximately one-half of the rural population from serfdom." The access of the rural poor to land, Tannenbaum argued firmly, was the fundamental demand of the Revolution and was a requisite for social peace in Mexico.²⁰

Therefore, when Tannenbaum met with Daniels in March of 1933, he brought a very different understanding of the Mexican Revolution than most of the Ambassador's peers in the State Department. Upon George Foster Peabody's suggestion, Tannenbaum mailed Daniels a copy of *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution* on March 21.²¹ The Ambassador was so intrigued by Tannenbaum's "rare knowledge" that they met the following day for a "two hours talk" in Washington.²² The following week, Tannenbaum visited Daniels, Daniels' wife Addie, and their son Worth at Worth's home in

²⁰ On Gamio's visit, see Peabody to Tannenbaum, March 4, 1924, General Correspondence, Box 19, Folder 5, George Foster Peabody papers (hereafter GFP), LoC, and Peabody to Tannenbaum, April 12, 1924, General Correspondence, Box 20, Folder 4, GFP. Frank Tannenbaum, *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1929), 187, 404. For Tannenbaum and Peabody's exchanges during the writing of the thesis, see Tannenbaum to Peabody, April 29, 1927, Series II, Box 4, FTP, and Tannenbaum to Peabody, June 26, 1929, General Correspondence, Box 25, Folder 5, GFP. For examples of Tannenbaum's activism on behalf of the Mexican Revolution in the popular sphere, see "The Miracle School," *The Century Magazine*, August 1923, and "Making Mexico Over," *New Republic*, July 18, 1928.

²¹ Tannenbaum to Daniels, March 21, 1933, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

²² Daniels to Peabody, April 3, 1933, General Correspondence, Box 43, Folder 1, GFP.

Washington, where he showed them slides and short films taken from his earlier journeys into rural Mexico to see peasant schools and *ejido* farms.²³ Daniels effused to Tannenbaum that his impressions of Mexico were “gathered in a way that gives you a knowledge of the country and its people which could not be obtained in any other way.”²⁴ Promising to read the dissertation on the train ride down into Mexico, Daniels also invited Tannenbaum to visit him in Mexico City as soon as he could.²⁵

As soon as Daniels entered Mexico, he sought to understand the nation and its revolution through the binary lenses of the New Deal and his American South. In his April 1933 inaugural speech in Mexico City, Daniels interpreted the social reforms and rhetoric of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario as a kindred movement to Roosevelt’s domestic program, as both nations had “embarked upon new and well-considered experiments with optimism born out of courage.”²⁶ Daniels was also quick to draw commonalities between the land tenure systems of Mexico and that of his home, as “we know something about the evils of the tenant system and absentee landlordism.”²⁷ In trying to explain rural Mexico to his children in North Carolina, he translated “*campesino*” – literally meaning “country person” – into “tenant.”²⁸ Such comparisons led Daniels to a new understanding of the Revolution. To Roosevelt, Daniels confessed in May 1933 that land “is the acute question here under the surface.” Channeling Tannenbaum, Daniels told the U.S. President that “Mexico can never really prosper until

²³ Daniels describes the visit later in his diary; see Daniels diary, November 21, 1933, Diaries, Reel 5, Daniels papers, LoC.

²⁴ Daniels to Tannenbaum, March 23, 1933, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

²⁵ On Daniels reading Tannenbaum on his visit down to Mexico, see Daniels to Peabody, April 3, 1933, General Correspondence, Box 43, Folder 1, GFP; his invitation to visit is in Daniels to Tannenbaum, April 21, 1933, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

²⁶ Inaugural address excerpts are from reprint in *Real Mexico*, Speeches, Writings, Related Materials, Box 718, Folder 6, Daniels papers, LoC.

²⁷ Daniels diary, February 2, 1935, Diaries, Reel 6, Daniels papers, LoC.

²⁸ Ibid. Daniels’ diary entries also served as letters home to his children in Raleigh.

there is a larger opportunity for the average man to own land... It is still rankling in the hearts of the many that the promise of land has materialized only in a comparatively small way.”²⁹ Even as the Embassy was increasingly submerged in claims by American property-holders whose land had been expropriated by the Mexican government, Daniels began to cultivate a strong sympathy with the rural dispossessed in Mexico that would define his role in the developing controversy.³⁰

Yet the most decisive moment in Daniels’ Mexican education came in late November of 1933, when Tannenbaum came to visit Daniels for the first of many times in Mexico City. Over Thanksgiving dinner at the Embassy, Tannenbaum urged that Daniels accompany him on a journey to rural Indian villages outside of the city to demonstrate the successes of the Revolution’s evolving land and education policy. Daniels agreed, and three days later joined the young scholar on a horseback tour of *ejido* farms and schools in an Otomi Indian community in the nearby state of Hidalgo. To Daniels, the voyage was “a revelation,” he wrote in his diary. “They are doing here on a smaller scale exactly what [educational reformers] did in North Carolina forty or fifty years ago in the beginning of our educational renaissance.”³¹ Describing his trip with Tannenbaum to Roosevelt a few days later, Daniels proclaimed that “if the Revolution, which put an end to exploitation of Mexicans by foreigners which reached its peak under Díaz, had accomplished nothing else than the new day for the Otomi Indians, it

²⁹ Daniels to FDR, May 2, 1933, Special Correspondence, Reel 59, Daniels papers, LoC.

³⁰ There is no better account of the land expropriation politics between the U.S. and Mexico than Dwyer’s *The Agrarian Dispute*. Dwyer explores how Daniels’ New Dealism shaped his interpretation of revolutionary Mexico, but he does not discuss Daniels’ background in agrarian politics or his southern regionalism.

³¹ Details on their dinner meeting and Tannenbaum’s tales of rural progress, as well as Daniels’ quotes, are from Daniels diary, December 2, 1933, Diaries, Reel 5, Daniels papers, LoC.

demonstrates its worth to the long suffering Indians of the Republic.”³² By the standards of the American diplomatic corps in Mexico, those were strong words indeed.



Figure 2.3. Josephus Daniels and his wife Addie in *charro* costumes, Mexico City, 1937. Unlike his peers in both the American Embassy and State Department, Daniels sympathized with revolutionary Mexico, both culturally and politically. (Tannenbaum papers, Series VI, Box 57)

Thus, within a year of his arrival, Daniels had become a firm proponent of Mexican revolutionary agrarianism, and his early sympathy would be of increasing importance when in 1934, the Mexican government began a decisive turn toward the left. Land redistribution, little more than empty rhetoric for nearly a generation, would in the course of the next few years come to anchor a concrete political strategy. It was a slow transition, for even after the “*jefe máximo*” Plutarco Elias Calles had formally left power

³² Daniels to Roosevelt, December 11, 1933, Roosevelt papers, Official File (hereafter OF) 237, FDRL.

in 1928, he retained his grip on state power through a series of puppet presidents. In 1934, however, Calles allowed the Partido Nacional Revolucionario to nominate Lázaro Cárdenas as its candidate for the next *sexenio*, or six-year term. Cárdenas, then the young and relatively unknown governor of the western state of Michoacán, had in the preceding years boldly experimented with the subdivision of large estates and the creation of *ejidos* on a scale that was unprecedented in his region. Cárdenas actively campaigned across rural Mexico in 1934, highly unusual in an election virtually engineered by the ruling party, but his interest in *campesino* problems earned him an unprecedented popularity.³³

When Cárdenas took office in December of 1934, he encountered an American ambassador who understood Mexico in a drastically different way from his diplomatic predecessors. Especially after 1935, when Cárdenas exiled Calles and moved aggressively toward making land expropriation the foundation of his political program, Daniels would be forced to choose between his agrarian sympathies and the State Department's demands that he protect American-owned rural property in Mexico, as millions of acres targeted for expropriation belonged to U.S. investors and businesses. More often than not, Daniels chose the former. Cárdenas himself recognized the crucial role of Daniels in the course of *agrarismo*. With his "effort to identify with the true significance of our reforms," Cárdenas wrote a friend in 1937, Daniels "has achieved more...than any other Ambassador could have achieved with arrogance and demands."³⁴ While Cárdenas' agrarian campaign will be more fully explored in the following chapter, it is important to note that Daniels' romanticization of the Mexican agrarian Revolution,

³³ On Cárdenas' earlier career and education by the Michoacán *campesinos*, see Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*.

³⁴ Lázaro Cárdenas to Francisco Castillo Nájera, October 29, 1937, Archivo Particular de Francisco Castillo Nájera, Caja 9, Expediente 50, AHSRE.

along with Cárdenas' skillful ability to exploit those sympathies for Mexico's benefit, proved a crucial ingredient in the success of the land redistribution campaign that peaked in the late 1930s. "As he sees the land cut up into little squares and parceled out to the people," wrote one American journalist of Daniels in 1937, "his Jeffersonian nerve centers tingle with pleasure."³⁵

Yet Daniels' rural re-education in Mexico during 1933 and 1934 would not only reshape his diplomatic career in Mexico City. It would also revise his understanding of land tenure in his home state, and push him toward new political solutions to the inequalities that plagued the U.S. South. His Mexican education even pushed him to emphasize the social bonds of class over those of race. On May 18, 1934, Daniels returned home to the United States for the first time to celebrate his seventy-second birthday with his family in North Carolina. In his honor the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce threw him a birthday dinner, attended by the city's most prominent business elites. That evening, before the audience, Daniels unexpectedly began to pontificate on "what the United States might learn from its Southern neighbor...a country we ought to be proud to have as a neighbor." Speaking on "the division of the great haciendas, and the enabling of men who had long tilled the soil to become owners of the land," Daniels told the increasingly shocked crowd that "the next forward step in North Carolina and the South is to divide large plantations so that the large tenant class may own the soil they till."³⁶

What Daniels could not have expected was that in the months that followed, his friend Frank Tannenbaum would attempt to do exactly that: translate the agrarian vision

³⁵ Hubert Herring, "The Department of State: A Review with Recommendations to the President," *Harper's Magazine* 174, February 1937.

³⁶ Daniels diary, May 18, 1934, Diaries, Reel 5, Daniels papers, LoC.

of the Mexican Revolution into the American South. His success in doing so, and the role of Mexican comparisons in radicalizing New Deal farm policy, compels us to seriously rethink an important chapter in United States history by integrating its transnational and cosmopolitan influences.

Reading the U.S. South through a Mexican Lens: Frank Tannenbaum and the Sharecroppers' Struggle

As the previous chapter illustrated, the capitalist and developmentalist regimes that ruled Mexico and the American South in the late nineteenth century pulled formerly independent rural people into the plantation nexus. In Mexico, villagers and peasants were evicted from subsistence-oriented plots and converted to peons and wage laborers on export-oriented haciendas. In the American South, former white yeomen and African-American freedmen were chained to the cotton plantation as tenants and sharecroppers by the bonds of debt and credit. While the Mexican Revolution had placed that nation on the slow path toward balancing its agrarian inequalities through the nascent project of land redistribution, in the American South rural revolt achieved no such victory. In the early twentieth century, the institution of tenancy only grew in size, as rapid fluctuation in cotton prices repeated the cycle of bankruptcy and dispossession. By 1930, the majority of U.S. southern farmers were tenants and croppers, a far higher number than thirty years earlier.³⁷

During those decades, however, southern sharecropping and tenancy in many ways reflected the Mexican rural maxim of “*duro pero seguro*” – hard but certain.

³⁷ For a chart on the expansion of tenancy and sharecropping across the American South, see Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 118.

Communal networks of assistance served rural families as a loose social safety net. While it was deeply paternalistic and racist, the region's landowners cultivated a sense of *noblesse oblige* that endowed them with the duty of social responsibility for those who worked their land. These moral economies between landowners and tenants, however uneven, maintained the general stability of southern rural life in the early twentieth century. However, the increasing availability of northern industrial jobs beginning with World War I would inaugurate a prolonged outmigration of black southerners. With the flight of tens of thousands of African-American families from the region in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the foundations of the southern cotton plantation felt its first tremors of change.

Yet if the northbound "Great Migration" of black southerners was the first blow against the plantation's status quo, any sense of rural equilibrium in the region would be forever lost during the first few years of the New Deal. The remainder of this chapter will examine how the early cotton programs of the rural New Deal shattered the foundations of the tenant-based economy in the American South, and how a network of agrarian reformers led by Will Alexander, Edwin Embree, and Frank Tannenbaum sought to respond to the rapid collapse of sharecropping and the concomitant eviction of tenants. In looking for inspiration in approaching the southern rural crisis, these reformers looked again and again to Mexico and its evolving program of land reform, which they saw as a novel and ground-breaking approach to overcoming deep-seated patterns of rural inequality. In demonstrating how these transnational agrarian comparisons gave birth to one of the New Deal's most radically redistributionist agencies – the Farm Security

Administration – I will argue that cosmopolitan borrowing dramatically broadened the New Deal’s promises to the most marginal of rural Americans.

As soon as Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, there was a vast clamor among rural Americans that he respond to the Great Depression’s impact on agriculture and the plummeting of farm prices and income. Yet that clamor came from rather diverse sources, and the solutions that various groups of farmers offered differed greatly across class and region. Radical groups such as the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union demanded assistance to landless farmers and opportunities for purchasing plots of their own, but more politically prominent midwestern grain and livestock farmers simply wanted government aid in raising prices for their products. In the New Deal’s first incarnation, Roosevelt overwhelmingly favored this latter group, and the agrarian legislation of 1933 and 1934 reflected this alliance with the wealthier farmers of the North and Midwest.

Roosevelt’s trump card in addressing the declining prices of agricultural commodities was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Since the mid-1920s, agricultural economists in the United States had pushed for production limits in American agriculture to combat the falling prices of farm products, but had seen little success under that decade’s Republican administrations.³⁸ Roosevelt proved far more receptive to such ideas, and in the first hundred days of his administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture inaugurated the AAA. The program was based upon a relatively simple idea: if farmers took a proportion of their land out of cash crop production, supply would decline and prices would naturally rise. AAA thus asked farmers to reduce their acreage of key crops by about one-third and then compensated

³⁸ See David Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

them for their lost profits. It was intended as a temporary stop-gap mechanism to raise rural incomes, but in the South, that program had vast and unanticipated consequences. Control of the cotton section of AAA, both at the federal and local level, lay squarely with southern planters and their allies. These men worried little when they discovered that landowners were evicting tenants whose land was taken out of production, pocketing the federal money that was supposed to be distributed evenly, and investing it in tractors and other labor-saving technologies. Southern planters saw AAA as an opportunity to erode the hated compromise of sharecropping and transition toward their preferred system of wage labor. Among black and white tenants and sharecroppers, however, the disruption of the old equilibrium was life-changing. Some packed up and left the region, while others organized and joined radical organizations such as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union.³⁹

One group that took particular notice of the developing crisis in the Cotton Belt was the Julius Rosenwald Fund of Chicago. Founded by the Sears and Roebuck chief executive of the same name in 1917, the Rosenwald Fund had spent a vast sum of money after the war on improving the welfare of black Americans, through the building of thousands of "Rosenwald schools" – simple, one-room buildings devoted to the education of blacks in southern counties that were spending next to nothing on African-American schooling. After hosting a number of conferences in the fall of 1933 detailing the havoc that AAA was wreaking upon black southerners, Rosenwald Fund president Edwin Embree allied with Will Alexander of the Atlanta-based Commission on Interracial

³⁹ On the New Deal's early agricultural programs in the South, see Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, especially Chapter Five, Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, and Wright, *Old South, New South*. While a number of scholars have argued that the world of sharecropping was breaking down already before AAA was passed, the Act nevertheless provided an easy and convenient target for those seeking to slow the eviction of sharecroppers, and thus facilitated organizing against the planter dominance of southern politics.

Cooperation to draft a “long-term program of rehabilitation of the rural Negro.”⁴⁰ In early 1934, they successfully secured a \$50,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to “set in motion or strengthen movements that may be expected to have some effect” upon the crisis in U.S. southern agriculture.⁴¹

Both Embree and Alexander were members of a growing inter-racial network of liberals that sought to challenge the status quo in southern race relations, politics, and economics. Like their liberal allies Clark Foreman, Charles S. Johnson, Howard Odum, George Foster Peabody, and others, they were inspired by Roosevelt’s rhetorical commitment to economic democracy and sought to use the crisis of the Depression to push for a change in the “solid South” of the 1930s. By no means radical, well-educated and often with strong links to the academic world, they were nevertheless an instrumental group in pressuring the often-reluctant New Deal administration toward black rights. Embree was a well-to-do midwesterner who had first entered philanthropy during World War I as a secretary at the Rockefeller Foundation, rising to become its Vice President by the mid-1920s. Interestingly, when he joined the Rosenwald Fund in 1928, the first project that Embree planned was a study of Mexican revolutionary schools to be used as an example for U.S. southern rural education.⁴² Alexander was a born southerner and a doctor of theology, who had taken leadership of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation when it was founded in 1919, in the wake of the major race riots that

⁴⁰ Will Alexander to Stacy May, January 10, 1934, Rockefeller Foundation archives (hereafter RFA), RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 324, Folder 3864, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY (hereafter RAC).

⁴¹ Edwin Embree to Edmund Day, November 2, 1933, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 324, Folder 3864, RAC. Details of grant are in Norma Thompson to Will Alexander, January 25, 1934, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 324, Folder 3864, RAC.

⁴² Edwin Embree to Dwight Morrow, May 1, 1928, Julius Rosenwald Fund papers, Box 116, Folder 16, Franklin Library, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee. Embree was also interested in cooperating with the Mexican government in its administration of schools, but this was ultimately rejected by the Mexicans because of its political volatility.

followed black troops' return home from the war. From its headquarters in Atlanta, the Commission pushed for anti-lynching laws, an end to the all-white Democratic primary election, and the overturning of Jim Crow segregation.⁴³

With their sizable grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, Embree and Alexander began to strategize about how best to reduce the escalating eviction of tenants and croppers. They decided that the initial step was to generate publicity: if they could make the transformation of the rural South a topic of national significance, they had a better chance of changing the administration of AAA. Their first action was to organize a scholarly study of shifting land tenure, employing a number of leading southern sociologists including Arthur Raper, Rupert Vance, and T.J. Woofert of the University of North Carolina.⁴⁴ But when the sociologists began generating hundreds upon hundreds of pages of dry, academic prose, Alexander realized that a detailed scholarly study would accomplish very little for their cause. "I said, for God's sake, let's don't publish a lot of big books about this thing," remembered Alexander later. "Let's maybe not publish anything."⁴⁵

Yet Embree and Alexander were not entirely sure what approach might be more effective than "big books." In early March of 1934, Alexander reached out to his friend and mentor George Foster Peabody for guidance as he planned the joint Rosenwald-

⁴³ On the networks of reformist southern liberals and their attempt to challenge the status quo, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), or for a less optimistic account of these relatively moderate reformers, Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: Norton, 2009). Alexander and Embree both have useful biographies; see Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change: The Life of Will Alexander* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Alfred Perkins, *Edwin Rogers Embree: The Julius Rosenwald Fund, Foundation Philanthropy, and American Race Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

⁴⁴ Will Alexander to Stacy May, January 24, 1935, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 324, Folder 3865, RAC.

⁴⁵ Will Alexander, *The Reminiscences of Will Winton Alexander* (New York: Columbia University Oral History Research Office, 1952), 376.

Commission program. “Before I see Embree,” wrote Alexander, “I must see you,” and planned to visit Peabody in mid-March at his winter home in Warm Springs, Georgia.⁴⁶ Peabody, sympathizing with Alexander’s description of the plight of black tenants under AAA, decided that the best way to arrive at an action program for the rural South was to host a conference of leading southern reformers on “the very desperate conditions resulting in that section from the widespread influence of the economic debacle.” Peabody offered to host the conference, planned for the summer, at his scenic home on Triuna Island on Lake George in upstate New York. Alongside Embree, Alexander, the sociologist Woofter and his cohort, Peabody invited the presidents of major universities in the South and other “leading Educators of our Southland” for a week-long retreat at Triuna Island.⁴⁷ Perhaps as an afterthought, Peabody also decided to invite Frank Tannenbaum, his earlier collaborator in matters regarding the U.S. South and Mexico.⁴⁸ In late July of 1934, over the course of several days, the dozen or so reformers discussed the deepening crisis of the South in the Depression and proposed possible courses of action.

To Embree and Alexander, Tannenbaum was the most interesting figure they met at the conference. Embree had long been fascinated with the Mexican Revolution, and Alexander too grew captivated by Tannenbaum’s knowledge of “another kind of agrarian

⁴⁶ Will Alexander to George Foster Peabody, March 9, 1934, General Correspondence, Box 46, Folder 1, GFP. Peabody, originally from nearby Columbus, had a long history in Warm Springs. In the 1920s, when his New York acquaintance Franklin Roosevelt had been diagnosed with polio, it was Peabody who had convinced Roosevelt of the potential curative effects of the water at Warm Springs. Thus, when Roosevelt became President, Peabody became a common fixture at the “Little White House” in Warm Springs, and remained a close, informal advisor to the President until his death in 1938.

⁴⁷ Peabody to Alexander, June 28, 1934, FDR papers, PPF 660, FDRL. Peabody had sent this letter along to Roosevelt to let him know about the conference.

⁴⁸ Evidence of Tannenbaum’s attendance at Triuna Island is from his 1934 appointment book, July 28-30, Series VII, Box 57, FTP.

problem that wasn't altogether foreign to this one here in the South." Alexander recalled telling Tannenbaum that

we'd like to hire you to go South in your own way. If you've looked at Mexico, land reform, and rural poverty...we want you to go...with your background of experience in looking at that sort of thing in other countries, and tell us what you see.⁴⁹

Embree and Alexander offered Tannenbaum \$500 to journey across the cotton South and then to interpret his observations "dramatically and strikingly" for a popular audience."⁵⁰ Not having studied the U.S. South in many years and having obligations in Mexico, Tannenbaum was uncertain, but agreed to meet Embree, Alexander, and Fisk University sociologist Charles S. Johnson in early October at Alexander's house in Atlanta.⁵¹

In the course of a few hours' conversation in Atlanta on October 9, Tannenbaum was again converted to the cause of U.S. southern agrarian reform. His solution, which the group would champion, was deeply influenced by the world that Tannenbaum knew best: the agrarian program of the Mexican Revolution and its emphasis on *ejidos* and schools. To counter the "unexpected flood [that] has carried away the narrow foothold [tenants] had managed to achieve," Tannenbaum recommended an initially modest program of land reform, where "agricultural lands might be turned over to the community in the same way or it might be given to each family individually." Beginning in one model county, they would "settle [about] three hundred families in a community with perhaps a half acre of land about each house." "If any luxury were to be indulged in it would go into the church and school, especially the school," which was to "be used as a

⁴⁹ Alexander, *The Reminiscences of Will Winton Alexander*, 376-7.

⁵⁰ Will Alexander to Stacy May, January 24, 1935, RFA, Record Group 1.1, Series 200, Box 324, Folder 3865, RAC.

⁵¹ Evidence of their Atlanta meeting is from Tannenbaum's 1934 appointment book, October 9, Series VII, Box 57, FTP.

community centre where all activities of the community and all public functions would take place.”⁵² To settle any doubts as to where Tannenbaum’s inspiration came from, a week later he invited Embree to travel with him in Mexico, most likely to show off some of the same sites that he had taken Ambassador Daniels to a year earlier. While Embree found the invitation “alluring,” it is uncertain whether he went to Mexico that year.⁵³

Having cast his lot with the southern liberals, Tannenbaum agreed to take an automobile trip across the South and then write both a popular, publishable account and a formal proposal for action that would be brought to the USDA. Between the fifth and twenty-first of December, 1934, Tannenbaum crisscrossed the southeast. Beginning in Washington, he drove to Nashville and then on to the Mississippi Delta, southeastern Arkansas, Memphis, and finally Atlanta, investigating public schools, plantations, and universities along the way.⁵⁴ When he met with Alexander on his last stop, Alexander remembered that the young professor was stunned by what he had seen. “This thing’s collapsed,” Tannenbaum declared of the tenancy complex. “It calls for long-time heroic treatment... You’ve got to do something about it, and this New Deal’s got to do something about it.”⁵⁵

Back in Washington, Tannenbaum began work on a policy proposal for the Department of Agriculture. Titled “A Program to Develop a New System of Rural Land Tenure,” the twelve-page proposal was a radically visionary document that suggested a profound shift in how the American state would govern its countryside. It was, predictably, deeply inspired by Tannenbaum’s experiences in Mexico. To combat the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Embree to Tannenbaum, October 25, 1934, Series V, Box 25, FTP.

⁵⁴ Tannenbaum 1934 appointment book, December 5 – 21, Series VII, Box 57, FTP.

⁵⁵ Alexander, *The Reminiscences of Will Alexander*, 377.

“abnormal and unsocial aspects of the system of land tenure” in the South, the federal government would create an independent agency dedicated to land reform. Endowed with \$300 million per year, that agency would purchase land held by insurance companies and federal land banks in addition to those “held by private landlords, particularly lands where the landlord function [sic] is not [serving] an adequately social purpose.” When such land was distributed to worthy tenants, it would “insure reasonable stability of occupancy of those farmers who are willing to work and save.” Perhaps most powerful, however, was Tannenbaum’s declaration on the very first page of the proposal: “Most civilized nations of the world have long since developed far-reaching measures for the amelioration of conditions of land tenure. Recently, our neighbor to the south has converted its peons into peasant proprietors. We have done nothing in the United States.” There remained little doubt as to the origins of Tannenbaum’s model for land reform.⁵⁶

Alexander and Embree decided that with his base in Washington at the Brookings Institute, Tannenbaum would be the best candidate of them to collaborate with the USDA and push Congress for legislation. Increasing his pay from \$500 to a sizable \$4,500, they hired Tannenbaum an additional eight months for “conferences with government officials.”⁵⁷ Just before Christmas of 1934, Tannenbaum had his first meeting with Paul Appleby, the Assistant to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, and then Chester Davis, the administrator of AAA, to discuss his “proposal for a comprehensive land

⁵⁶ Frank Tannenbaum, “A Program to Develop a New System of Rural Land Tenure,” undated (written in late December 1934), RG 83: Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Entry 177, Box 1, Folder 8, NA.

⁵⁷ Detailed Report on Expenditures, Committee on Negroes and Economic Reconstruction, February 2, 1935, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 324, Folder 3865, RAC.

distribution program.”⁵⁸ Tannenbaum claimed that both men were enthusiastic about his program, though it is rather unlikely that Davis, a staunch conservative, would have approved of Tannenbaum’s vision had he known the full extent of it.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, both men pressured Tannenbaum to prepare a shorter, simplified draft of his proposal for circulation in the Department. Tannenbaum did so within a few days, slightly moderating his proposal. Likely anticipating charges of radicalism, he cut any direct references to Mexico or plans to purchase private lands, but kept intact all else. In order to secure “the conversion of the tenant and share-cropper, and those recently set afloat, into an independent small landowning agriculturalist,” they would be sold federal land that had formerly been held by insurance companies and the government Land Banks. Such a program would “have the effect of returning to the native local populations the properties now held by outside corporations.” Like the Mexican *ejido*, which served as Tannenbaum’s implicit model, that land could not be resold, mortgaged, or placed under lien “to any person other than the Federal corporation set up to carry out this program.”⁶⁰

After their sympathetic reception in the USDA, Embree too came to Washington from Chicago to escalate the political pressure. On January 8, 1935, he and Tannenbaum met with Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace for the first time, and on the following day, with USDA liberals Jerome Frank of the legal office and Calvin Hoover, an economic advisor to the Department. Frank and Hoover suggested that Embree and

⁵⁸ Tannenbaum to Alexander, December 26, 1934, Series VI, Box 61, FTP. While his title of “Assistant to the Secretary” of the USDA makes Appleby sound like a clerk, it was an important formal position that placed him within the upper echelons of the policy-making world in the USDA.

⁵⁹ Ibid. On Davis and the evolving administration of AAA, see Daniels, *Breaking the Land*, 101-6. On a interesting side note, it was in February of 1935 that Davis oversaw the infamous “purge” of AAA that threw out Jerome Frank and several other liberals from the bureau.

⁶⁰ Tannenbaum to Paul Appleby and Chester Davis, December 29, 1934, Series VI, Box 61, FTP. On the early push to convince the USDA of the value of tenant legislation, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, Chapter V. Baldwin acknowledges the crucial role of Tannenbaum in these negotiations, but makes nothing of Tannenbaum’s Mexican experiences or influences.

Tannenbaum adopt a Senate sponsor to present their proposal as a bill in Congress, and on the following day, Tannenbaum met with Senator John H. Bankhead of Alabama.⁶¹ Bankhead was a moderate Democrat who had been active in his support for New Deal legislation, but was also a firm opponent of anti-lynching bills and other civil rights measures. In early 1935, Bankhead had begun expressing public interest in presenting a bill to aid southern tenants and croppers, and was thus receptive when approached by Tannenbaum in early January.⁶² Alexander, Embree, Charles Johnson of Fisk University, and Tannenbaum wrote the blueprint for Bankhead's bill in the next week, titled "Rehomesteading on Small Farms," which retained Tannenbaum's framework for land reform based on government distribution of under-utilized land.⁶³ On February 11, Bankhead introduced Senate Bill S.1800, "The Farm Tenant Homes Act," which would create a federal agency to purchase and resell land, under the control of the USDA. The bill mirrored the recommendations of the Rosenwald team and sought to promote "a democratic system of land tenure...in accordance with the example of many other civilized countries."⁶⁴

As the tenant bill was being revised for submission, George Foster Peabody began to exploit his close connections with Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party leadership to further the cause of southern land reform. Despite being in his early eighties, he showed unflagging support for expanding the New Deal's promises. He wrote personally to Roosevelt on behalf of Tannenbaum, whom "the President will

⁶¹ Tannenbaum 1935 appointment book, January 8-9, Series VII, Box 57, FTP.

⁶² On Bankhead's background, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 132-3.

⁶³ Will Alexander, Charles S. Johnson, Edwin Embree, and Frank Tannenbaum, "Rehomesteading on Small Farms (Especially Applicable to the Cotton States)," RG 16: Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-I, Box 2115, Folder S.1800, NA.

⁶⁴ S.1800, 74th Congress, 1st session, February 11, 1935, *Congressional Record*, Vol. 79, 1782.

welcome an opportunity to call [on] and get his story directly.”⁶⁵ To key Senators who were dragging their feet on the Bankhead bill vote, he wrote of the profound importance of the bill and demanded its immediate passage.⁶⁶ When the bill encountered opposition in the Senate, predictably on the grounds that it was socialistic and un-American, Peabody took the lead in a public defense of the bill. In late March of 1935, he agreed to serve as Chairman, with Tannenbaum as his Secretary, of the newly created Committee on Small Farm Ownership that was jointly organized by Alexander and Embree. With the close cooperation of Assistant Secretary of Agriculture M.L. Wilson, the Committee rallied the support of prominent southerners and farm leaders to publicly back the bill, in hopes that the display of support would dispel charges of radicalism.⁶⁷

Tannenbaum too proved to be an unusually adept political negotiator. In addition to his constant meetings with the USDA leadership through winter and spring of 1935, Tannenbaum entered the public sphere as a proponent of the bill he had played such a decisive role in writing.⁶⁸ In a letter to the editor of *The New Republic*, Tannenbaum boldly asserted that the Bankhead bill would “make possible the break-up of the plantation system in the South.”⁶⁹ In the columns of the *New York Times* he argued that

⁶⁵ Peabody to FDR, January 11, 1935, FDR papers, PPF 660 cross-references, FDRL. There is no evidence that FDR met with Tannenbaum in early 1935, however.

⁶⁶ See, for example, letters to Senators Bronson Cutting and William McAdoo, both written on April 20, 1935, FDR papers, PPF 660, FDRL.

⁶⁷ On the organizing of the Committee, see Alexander to Tannenbaum, Embree, and Johnson, March 25, 1935, Series VI, Box 61, FTP. The Committee ultimately gained the support of Clark Howell of the *Atlanta Constitution*, W.E.B. DuBois of Atlanta University, Clarence Poe of Raleigh, N.C.’s *Progressive Farmer*, Robert Moton of Tuskegee Institute, Howard Odum of UNC-Chapel Hill, and a dozen others. See “Memorandum,” April 10, 1935, Series VI, Box 61, FTP.

⁶⁸ Between the beginning of January and the end of April 1935, Tannenbaum has 31 separate meetings with the leadership of the USDA, such as Wallace, Bankhead, M.L. Wilson, Rexford Tugwell, Jerome Frank, L.C. Gray, and others. See entries in Tannenbaum’s 1935 appointment book for January 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 25, 26, 28, February 5, 7, 21, 25, 27, March 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 18, 19, 20, 25, 27, 28, and April 11, 19, and 29, Series VII, Box 57, FTP.

⁶⁹ Frank Tannenbaum to the editor of *The New Republic*, April 22, 1935, Series V, Box 25, FTP. The letter was later published on June 5, 1935.

the bill “would create for the first time in the South the basis of a satisfactory rural life.”⁷⁰ Yet understanding the political climate in the United States, he eschewed any direct references to Mexico as a source of inspiration. If Tannenbaum publicly used global comparisons, he relied on the safer examples of Denmark and Ireland. However, this was purely a political ploy. Tannenbaum had little interest in Western Europe, and was most fascinated with the Mexican case. He also began assembling a personal network of key supporters. Through his acquaintances in the U.S. Catholic Church, which he had made earlier in the decade while mediating the conflict over religious persecution in Mexico, Tannenbaum secured a number of vocal allies for the Bankhead bill among the clergy and Church leadership.⁷¹ And from his close relations with the New York labor movement twenty years earlier, Tannenbaum earned the bill more supporters in the American Federation of Labor.⁷² He soon found himself at the very center of Washington politics, and the sensation was dizzying. “So many things are happening here,” he confessed to Alexander and Embree in late March 1935, “that I wish one of you was here to hold my hand.”⁷³

Perhaps Tannenbaum’s most valuable and effective ally in the Senate struggle was one he had come to know well in the previous year: Josephus Daniels. Two of the Bankhead bill’s key opponents were “Cotton Ed” Smith and Josiah Bailey, conservative Democratic senators from South and North Carolina, respectively, who each worked to sabotage the bill. To “build a fire under Bailey,” decided Tannenbaum, he would seek the

⁷⁰ Frank Tannenbaum, “Bill is Approved; Measure to Aid Share Croppers Found Badly Needed,” April 7, 1935, *New York Times*, E9.

⁷¹ On Tannenbaum’s solicitation of support from Catholic leaders, see Tannenbaum to Alexander and Embree, March 23, 1935, Series VI, Box 61, FTP, and “In Support of the Bankhead Bill,” *The Commonweal*, April 26, 1935. The U.S. Catholic Church’s support for land reform in the American South is deeply ironic considering their bitter opposition to such programs in Mexico during the same period.

⁷² Alexander to Peabody, May 7, 1935, General Correspondence, Box 47, Folder 2, GFP.

⁷³ Tannenbaum to Alexander and Embree, March 23, 1935, Series VI, Box 61, FTP.

aid of Daniels, “who is an old friend of mine and who, I am certain, will be fully in sympathy with the bill.”⁷⁴ Daniels, who had returned that spring to the United States from Mexico to celebrate his seventy-third birthday, met with Tannenbaum in Washington on May 21 and 22, 1935.⁷⁵ As predicted, Daniels expressed solidarity with the cause and went to work immediately, meeting that week with Roosevelt and Senators Bailey and William McAdoo to push them on action for the Bankhead bill.⁷⁶ Daniels’ son Jonathan, editing the *Raleigh News & Observer* in his father’s absence, also pledged his support to the bill.⁷⁷ When Bailey reversed his position on the bill, Tannenbaum was convinced that Daniels’ support had been the key ingredient in their success.⁷⁸

With Tannenbaum preoccupied with the political logistics of passing the bill, Embree, Alexander, and Johnson decided to write the short volume themselves that Tannenbaum had originally undertaken. Working from an outline prepared by the young professor, the three reformers digested the current crisis in the U.S. South and the possible solutions to it.⁷⁹ Their account, published in the summer of 1935 as *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, was a watershed account that detailed in eighty pages the havoc wrought by AAA in the Cotton Belt. Their solution lay with Tannenbaum and Bankhead’s bill: “the pressing needs of the millions of tenants” can only be met by a “general wide-scale distribution of lands,” “conducted in unified and carefully directed types of communities.” Like Tannenbaum, the authors cast the crisis as one to be conceived in global terms. In the book’s very last paragraph, Embree, Johnson, and

⁷⁴ Tannenbaum to Clarence Poe, April 24, 1935, Series VI, Box 61, FTP.

⁷⁵ Tannenbaum 1935 appointment book, May 21 and 22, Series VII, Box 57, FTP.

⁷⁶ Alexander to Peabody, May 27, 1935, General Correspondence, Box 47, Folder 2, GFP.

⁷⁷ Alexander to Peabody, May 7, 1935, General Correspondence, Box 47, Folder 2, GFP.

⁷⁸ Tannenbaum to W.T. Couch, May 29, 1935, Series V, Box 25, FTP.

⁷⁹ Untitled and undated outline, beginning with “A series of tables, maps, and charts...” Series V, Box 25, FTP. This four-page outline, however rough, was kept intact for Embree, Alexander, and Johnson’s book.

Alexander declared that “most civilized nations of the world long ago faced the problem of tenancy... Denmark systematically abolished tenancy completely, Ireland and Germany and Mexico have made drastic reforms. In the United States nothing of a serious and far-reaching character has been.” In contrast to the safer comparisons with Western Europe, the Mexican reference certainly stood out.⁸⁰

In both the public and official spheres, the book made a tremendous splash. Johnson gave a copy to Eleanor Roosevelt, who placed the book on her husband’s bedside table and “insisted he read it.”⁸¹ Roosevelt was so moved by the slender volume that he told his Secretary of Agriculture Wallace that “those fellows wrote the best book that has been written on Southern Agriculture.”⁸² Selling thousands of copies and stimulating a lively debate, *Collapse* generated the very publicity that Alexander had hoped for at the outset of their project. Combined with Tannenbaum and Peabody’s political successes in Washington, the book’s prominence gave a major boost that resulted, after a long struggle, in the passage of Bankhead’s bill in the Senate on June 25, 1935. To the Rosenwald team, the passage was a milestone. Embree immediately congratulated Tannenbaum on his “brilliant leadership” and their “great victory.”⁸³ Euphoric with their success, Tannenbaum boasted that the bill was “assured of passage, especially if we can keep it alive in the White House.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Charles S. Johnson, Edwin Embree, and W.W. Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: Summary of Field Studies and Statistical Surveys, 1933-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 65, 66, 78.

⁸¹ Patrick Gilpin and Marybeth Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 110.

⁸² George Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 416.

⁸³ Embree to Tannenbaum, June 25, 1935, Series VI, Box 61, FTP.

⁸⁴ Tannenbaum to Peabody, July 5, 1935, General Correspondence, Box 48, Folder 5, GFP.

Yet in spite of his sympathetic rhetoric, Roosevelt remained cautious and was not yet committed to taking political risks for poor white and black tenants, a constituency that admittedly had little political clout in Washington. The President's attention to rural affairs at the time was dominated by his recent creation of the Resettlement Administration, an independent agency that was the brainchild of his agricultural advisor Rexford Tugwell. The Bankhead bill, therefore, with little support from above and plenty of opposition from below, was not even raised for debate in the House before Congress adjourned on August 26. When Tugwell asked Alexander to join him as the second-in-command of the nascent Resettlement Administration, Alexander and Tannenbaum agreed that while they waited for direct action on their bill, Tugwell's agency would serve as a temporary medium for achieving the same results. Alexander pleaded for Tannenbaum to join him in the Resettlement Administration: "I just don't know just how I will get along without you," he wrote to the young scholar. "I think I can furnish as much enthusiasm for the Bankhead Bill as you have, but I haven't influence and contacts."⁸⁵ Yet Tannenbaum, who had just received a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation, decided to return to Mexico that summer for an extended trip, and announced that he would start a job at Columbia University when the new year began.

Throughout 1936, from their different vantage points, the original Rosenwald team continued to work for the rescue of the Bankhead bill, which remained buried in the Agriculture Committee of the House of Representatives. From within the Resettlement Administration, Alexander chafed under Tugwell's vision for rural America, which was far less sympathetic toward small-scale subsistence-oriented agriculture. Alexander also

⁸⁵ Alexander to Tannenbaum, July 2, 1935, Series VI, Box 61, FTP. On Alexander's offer to Tannenbaum to join the Resettlement Administration, see Alexander to Tannenbaum, July 3, 1935, Series V, Box 25, FTP.

expressed disdain at the agency's "frequent changes of policy" and the "general uncertainty which always prevails in connection with any of these emergency activities of government."⁸⁶ Embree continued their publicity campaign from Chicago, writing a series of fiery articles on the plight of southern tenants and croppers, such as a March 1936 essay in *Survey Graphic* that trumped the Bankhead bill as the "way out" for the collapsing rural South.⁸⁷ And despite his busy schedule at Columbia, Tannenbaum assured Alexander he could "count on me for the Bankhead Bill for every bit of usefulness in me."⁸⁸ But he too grew frustrated with the lack of support from Roosevelt, Bankhead, and Representative Marvin Jones of Texas, who was responsible for the bill's future in the House. In an unusually angry letter to Bankhead in February of 1936, Tannenbaum fumed that "it would be tragic from every point of view to permit your bill to die in the House." If the Roosevelt administration did not work toward the passage of the Bankhead bill, accused Tannenbaum, the President would be "faced with the charge that the New Deal had neglected to do anything for those who are least among us."⁸⁹

From Mexico City, Josephus Daniels too observed the stalled progress of the Bankhead bill with disappointment. As President Cárdenas dramatically escalated his land redistribution campaign in 1936 and *agrario* permeated the everyday life of the American embassy, Daniels became ever more convinced that the United States had to approach the complex problem of land tenure with the same resolve that Cárdenas and the Partido Nacional Revolucionario were displaying in Mexico. In September 1936,

⁸⁶ Alexander to Tannenbaum, September 21, 1936, Series VI, Box 61, FTP. On Tugwell's diverse and sometimes contradictory ideas for refashioning rural America, see Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964).

⁸⁷ Edwin Embree, "Southern Farm Tenancy: The Way Out of Its Evils," *Survey Graphic*, March 1936.

⁸⁸ Tannenbaum to Alexander, February 28, 1936, Series V, Box 25, FTP.

⁸⁹ Tannenbaum to Bankhead, February 28, 1936, Series VI, Box 61, FTP.

Daniels wrote a long letter to Roosevelt urging him to move faster on making Tannenbaum and Bankhead's bill a reality. "My repugnance to [tenancy] [has] been heightened by my knowledge that it had been the curse of Mexico," Daniels told the President. "Mexico was not only cursed with over-grown haciendas but also with the absentee ownership which cursed Ireland. Is it any wonder that the revolutionists made 'land and liberty' their slogan?" he mused. After describing the evolution of Cárdenas' agrarian program, Daniels pleaded to Roosevelt that "if tenancy continues to go forward by leaps and bounds in our country the time will come when peonage will be the curse of the United States as it has been of Mexico... You will avert this tragedy by securing just methods by which tenants may be aided to own the land they till."⁹⁰

Whether Daniels' and the Rosenwald team's pressure had a direct impact is impossible to tell, because the presidential election of November 1936 fully remade the political climate in Washington. During the fall Roosevelt had moved dramatically leftward in his rhetoric, to counter political opponents like Huey Long and Father John Coughlin. After achieving one of the largest electoral landslides in U.S. history, Roosevelt interpreted his popularity as a mandate on the New Deal, and boldly pushed to expand its reach. Projects that had earlier been postponed or neglected because of the political sensitivity of the election were now returned to the table. At the USDA, the political reorientation of November 1936 was felt just as deeply. Shortly after the election, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace declared that the USDA was entering a "newer phase of agricultural development," which would target "that growing part of our

⁹⁰ Daniels to Roosevelt, September 28, 1936, Special Correspondence, Reel 60, Daniels papers, LoC.

farm population which during the past has been submerged in poverty.”⁹¹ Farm tenancy and land reform, controversial topics that had been marginalized in the earlier year, were now granted the highest priority. Just a month after the election, the USDA began publishing a series of folksy pamphlets on rural social problems and their solution by government action. One was titled “Should Farm Ownership Be a Goal of Agricultural Policy?” In language familiar to common farmers, it argued that tenancy was rising faster than ever, and championed the Bankhead bill as the most effective response to rural inequality. “Other nations have attacked the problem in various ways,” the pamphlet reminded its readers. “Americans must find their own solution in their own way, in light of their own experience and world experience.”⁹²

Roosevelt too assisted in the popular swell toward action on the farm tenancy problem. First, he oversaw the transfer of Tugwell’s independent and increasingly unpopular Resettlement Administration to the USDA, where it would be under the oversight of Wallace. When Tugwell resigned, Roosevelt promoted Will Alexander to the position of the Resettlement Administration’s chief administrator. Secondly, the President nationally publicized the sharecroppers’ struggle when he formed the President’s Special Committee on Farm Tenancy in mid-November of 1936. With Wallace as its chairman, Roosevelt ordered the Committee to submit a report by February

⁹¹ Henry Wallace, speech entitled “Rural Poverty,” January 23, 1937, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-I, Box 2640, Folder 3, NA. Interestingly, historians have been slow to acknowledge the dramatic shift within the USDA. From the 1960s until rather recently, major works on the era characterized the entire New Deal USDA by its role in the conservative administration of AAA and the 1935 “purge” that removed the urban liberals from AAA. A number of recent works are challenging that interpretation: see Mary Summers, “The New Deal Farm Programs: Looking for Reconstruction in American Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000), Jess Gilbert, “Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal: A Different Kind of State,” in *Fighting for the Farm: Rural America Transformed*, ed. Jane Adams (Philadelphia, 2003), and Gilbert’s forthcoming monograph on the “intended” New Deal.

⁹² U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Should Farm Ownership be a Goal of Agricultural Policy?” December 1936. RG 83, Entry 177, Box 9, Folder 6, NA. For further reading, the pamphlet recommended to farmers *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, Socialist Party president Norman Thomas’s *The Plight of the Share-cropper*, and literature on the Bankhead-Jones Bill, all unimaginable a year earlier.

1 of the following year on a “long-term program of action to alleviate the shortcomings of our farm tenancy system.” In his letter formally organizing the Committee, Roosevelt also highlighted the “keen interest in this problem” expressed by John Bankhead and Marvin Jones, and urged Wallace to work with the two legislators toward a solution.⁹³ In early February, the Committee presented its report to Roosevelt in a document that rural sociologist Jess Gilbert recently characterized as “one of the most radical official documents ever issued by the U.S. Government.”⁹⁴ In many ways mirroring 1935’s *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, the report blended statistical data on the dramatic rise of tenancy and evictions with an emotional plea for federal reform. “We have to deal with abuses that have been developing for two centuries,” its authors demanded. And like the earlier Rosenwald Fund report, the Committee’s conclusions included an extended discussion of how other nations had approached rural inequality within their boundaries. Alongside less controversial references to Western Europe was an analysis of “recent land reforms in Mexico,” detailing the revolutionary state’s formalization of land redistribution through Article 27 of its Constitution.⁹⁵

To the Rosenwald team that had more than two years earlier begun the push for land reform and tenancy legislation, the sudden commitment from both the USDA and the White House was exhilarating. Sending Tannenbaum a copy of the President’s Committee report in early March of 1937, Will Alexander cheered that “we have come a

⁹³ Roosevelt to Wallace, November 16, 1936, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-I, Box 2439, Folder 1, NA. Roosevelt’s turn toward tenancy was part of a larger emphasis on southern poverty and problems; see Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), especially Chapter One.

⁹⁴ Jess Gilbert, “Agrarian Intellectuals in a Democratizing State: A Collective Biography of USDA Leaders in the Intended New Deal,” in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America*, eds. Catherine M. Stock and Robert D. Johnston (Ithaca, 2001), 233.

⁹⁵ President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy, “Farm Tenancy: Report of the President’s Committee” (Washington: Government Printing Office, February 1937), iv, 85.

long way in our thinking and in the thinking of Congress. The prospects for a real program are better than they have been at any time.”⁹⁶ Alexander was not wrong. With a boost from its new Washington allies, on June 29, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Security Act of 1937 passed the House of Representatives by a wide margin. On July 22, President Roosevelt signed the bill, creating the Farm Security Administration, which absorbed the Resettlement Administration but kept Alexander as its chief administrator.⁹⁷ While the final bill and structuring of the Farm Security Administration was far more moderate than the original proposal that Tannenbaum had presented to the USDA in early 1935, it retained a great deal. The bill authorized the Farm Security Administration to purchase land held by private banks, insurance companies and federal land banks and resell them at low costs and low interest rates to tenants who qualified for aid. As Tannenbaum had hoped for, access to land was accompanied by federal guidance on how and what to plant, with the hopes of ending the cycle of soil exploitation that had characterized tenant farming. The bill also provided easy credit to small-scale farmers under the guise of “rural rehabilitation,” which was also becoming of increasing importance in Mexico at the same time.⁹⁸

Alexander, Embree, Johnson, and Tannenbaum were understandably elated when news of the bill’s passage was made public. “In this legislation we have gone a long way,” exulted Alexander to Tannenbaum. “The germ of it I think started in your mind,

⁹⁶ Alexander to Tannenbaum, March 11, 1937, RG 96, Finding Aid PI-118, Entry 1, Box 14, Folder AD-2T, NA.

⁹⁷ Admittedly, for the purposes of brevity, I am simplifying the legislative process that resulted in the passing of the Bankhead-Jones bill. It is not the intent of this essay to revise our understanding of the Congressional struggle that gave birth to the bill, but to emphasize its early origins and the power that global comparisons, particularly with Mexico, played in its drafting. For an exhaustive discussion of the months of political negotiation that gave birth to the 1937 Bankhead-Jones bill, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, Chapter IV.

⁹⁸ On the early operation of the FSA, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, Chapter V.

and when I found that it finally passed [Congress] I wished that you were here so that we might have a drink and discuss the next war.” Their satisfaction in seeing the bill passed, however, was dampened by the many compromises that had been forced in making it palatable to a wide political audience. “The bill is not all that I think we should have,” Alexander admitted to Tannenbaum, but it was still more than they expected “when we wrote the original memorandum in my house in Atlanta.”⁹⁹

In Mexico, where the inspiration for the bill had originated, journalists and state bureaucrats curiously observed the tentative steps that the U.S. government was taking toward land reform. Two days after the Farm Security Administration was signed into law, the Mexico City newspaper *El Nacional* printed an article titled “The Situation of the North American *Campesino*.” After providing a brief sketch of “the lands of cotton, where tenancy has become a social cancer in the past decades,” the article pointed readers to the recent efforts of the U.S. federal government to overcome this “hopeless situation.” Echoing the contemporary debate in Mexico about whether former peons were capable of independence and landownership, the article firmly declared that the sharecroppers had demonstrated a “capacity for responsibility” and were fully deserving of the promises being offered by the nascent Farm Security Administration.¹⁰⁰

Other Mexican observers, especially those in the Cardenista government, were more skeptical and saw the U.S. federal reorientation toward agrarian issues as an empty gesture. In a report to the Secretariat of Foreign Relations, the Mexican ambassador to

⁹⁹ Alexander to Tannenbaum, July 15, 1937, Series VI, Box 61, FTP.

¹⁰⁰ “La situación del *campesino* norteamericano,” July 24, 1937, *El Nacional* (clipping from Caja 12, Archivo Ramón Fernández y Fernández, Biblioteca Luis González, Colegio de Michoacán, Zamora, Michoacán). I chose not to translate the word “*campesino*” because its use in reference to U.S. agriculture is rather unusual. “Agricultor” or “aparcero,” meaning farmer and sharecropper, respectively, would be more expected.

Washington Francisco Castillo Nájera argued that the New Deal's rural reform programs were "not seeking more than increasing the number of individual proprietors." While acknowledging that "this is the first time that a President of the United States has interested himself concretely in this aspect of the U.S. agrarian situation," Castillo Nájera pessimistically observed that in the President's Special Committee's report of January 1937 there was no reference to "any form of agricultural collectivization." Roosevelt "only looks for, in fewer words, to augment the ranks of the rural petit bourgeois, helping them gradually become independent from the great *latifundista* powers and financiers."¹⁰¹

Within the United States too, many who had been involved in the struggle for tenant legislation and rural reform were equally disappointed. Rexford Tugwell, the former architect of the Resettlement Administration and still a close advisor to Roosevelt despite his temporary exit from public affairs, also viewed the creation of the Farm Security Administration as more of a compromise than a victory. "It really is too bad that the tenant bill as it passed allowed nothing for communal and cooperative activities," he wrote to Roosevelt in the immediate aftermath of Bankhead-Jones' passage, as "we need to be more cooperative, all of us, if we need anything in the world." But Tugwell's understanding of the failures of American land reform, however, was in direct relation to another program that he was intently following. "I shall have to go to Mexico if I am to see the aims of the Resettlement Administration carried out," he proclaimed in the same

¹⁰¹ Francisco Castillo Nájera, "Informe Reglamentario del C. Embajador de México en Washington, D.C. sobre el programa agrario del President Roosevelt," March 15, 1937, Clasificación Topográfica 31-24-8, AHSRE.

letter. “Do you see what Cárdenas does to the big farmers [that] object to the confiscation of their estates?”¹⁰²

In contrast to the agrarian redistribution then being escalated in Mexico by Lázaro Cárdenas, the Farm Security Administration, as Tugwell and Castillo Nájera correctly observed, was strikingly un-ambitious. Yet in the context of U.S. politics, it was a dramatic departure. The Farm Security Administration represented both a symbolic and real attack on the root causes of rural poverty in the United States, particularly in the American South. In the words of the agency’s foremost biographer, its career symbolized a valiant attempt to secure “salvation from the human suffering, social injustice, and economic waste of chronic poverty.”¹⁰³ While often remembered for the memorable photographs it commissioned of rural America, the agency is most important for undertaking the first and perhaps only attempt in U.S. history to remake patterns of land tenure.¹⁰⁴ Under the leadership of Will Alexander and then C.B. Baldwin, the Farm Security Administration converted thousands of tenants and sharecroppers into small, land-owning farmers and endowed them with credit and basic technologies. Unlike AAA, whose administration had been dominated by southern landowners and their allies, the Farm Security Administration also offered its promises to black America, though it was

¹⁰² Tugwell to FDR, August 26, 1937, FDR papers, PPF 564, FDRL. It can only be guessed at how well Tugwell understood the debt that the FSA owed to Mexican agrarianism in the first place, through the medium of Tannenbaum.

¹⁰³ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, ix.

¹⁰⁴ It is not the goal of this essay to reinterpret the activities or impact of the Farm Security Administration. For the best recent examinations of the process and consequences of land reform and “rural rehabilitation” under the FSA, see Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, Chapter 2, Beeman and Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land*, Brown, *Back to the Land*, Chapter 5, and Gilbert, “Agrarian Intellectuals in a Democratizing State.”

decidedly slow in their fulfillment.¹⁰⁵ And in some ways, that agency went beyond Tannenbaum's initial proposal, particularly in its emphasis on ameliorating the position of migratory farm labor, a topic that had never concerned the Rosenwald group.¹⁰⁶ Yet from the day it was created, the Farm Security Administration faced the bitter opposition of landed elites and conservative southerners who saw the agency's rhetorical attacks on the plantation system as a mortal threat to their livelihoods. By the middle of World War II, these opponents exploited the deepening conservatism of U.S. national politics to defang the agency nearly completely.

In the lively dialogue between Mexican and U.S. rural reformers, the 1937 passage of the Farm Security Administration, born from Tannenbaum's interpretation of the Mexican *ejido*, marked a significant milestone. Yet rather than signifying an end, it marked a beginning. As both the Mexican and American governments placed their agrarian reform projects in high gear, the frequency of their comparisons across the border increased dramatically. The following chapter will explore these myriad crossings during the peak years of rural reform in each nation. At the dawn of the second World War and the era of Western-led "development" that would follow it, the mutual observation and cooperation of Mexican and U.S. agrarian reformers would forge a distinct model for rural change that would later echo across the globe.

¹⁰⁵ Pete Daniel has presented the most biting critique of the USDA's neglect and even attack on black farmers; see *Breaking the Land* and *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ See in particular Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), especially Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 3

POLITICAL PILGRIMAGES: INTELLECTUAL BORDER CROSSINGS AT THE U.S.-MEXICAN AGRARIAN APEX, 1937-1943

Seeing the United States from an automobile, Ramón Beteta was told in 1939, was the best way to experience the country. One of the key intellectuals in the mid-century Partido Nacional Revolucionario and in 1939 the under-secretary of Foreign Relations in the Cárdenas cabinet, Beteta was planning a voyage that April from Mexico City to Washington to meet with Mexican embassy officials. After traveling by train to San Antonio, Beteta boarded an embassy car and began the long journey across the United States. Even though Beteta admitted that automobile travel was “much slower” than train travel, it would give him the opportunity to “better understand the country.” Having earned a degree in economics at the University of Texas in the 1920s, Beteta was already familiar with the central plains of Texas, but as his car crawled eastward into the cotton South, the land and people underwent a metamorphosis. Leaving Texas, “agricultural conditions change fundamentally,” he wrote to President Cárdenas from the road. He observed “wooden shacks” and “palatial houses undoubtedly lived in by the landowners.” Beyond Texas, “the Mexican population disappears almost completely, the white one diminishes, while the black takes over the majority.” Yet most importantly, Beteta noticed that “the system of cultivation is analogous to our haciendas,” as “the social organization is aristocratic.” “The open countryside” of the Cotton Belt, reflected

Beteta wisely from his automobile, “reminds one of the situation of our country.” He was not alone in his observation.¹

Three years later, Claude Wickard, the United States Secretary of Agriculture and an ardent New Dealer, retraced Beteta’s steps backwards as he traveled from Washington to attend the Second Inter-American Conference on Agriculture in Mexico City. Like others in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Wickard had long been interested in the agrarian program of the Mexican Revolution, but beyond news coverage and books he had little experience with the country. By train, Wickard and his companions traveled through the southern Cotton Belt, then the target of the USDA’s most aggressive social programs, and crossed the Mexican border at Laredo during the night. “We awakened early Sunday morning for our first glimpse of Mexico,” he wrote in his diary, “and our first impression was one of poor land and poor people.” But as they steamed through the arid north and into the verdant central plateau, Wickard noticed that “people lived in villages and formed the *ejidos* [sic] type of cooperative farming.” As Wickard grew “very interested in the *ejido* system,” he observed that “their method of farming seemed primitive yet they were getting all from the soil that could be obtained.” Americans, he decided at last, “could not question the objectives of the [Mexican] land reform.”²

Wickard was so enthused by what he saw in Mexico that he felt compelled to communicate to U.S. farmers the successes of the Mexican rural experiment. In the following weeks, Wickard dedicated two radio addresses during the USDA “National

¹ Ramón Beteta to Lázaro Cárdenas, May 5, 1939, Box 1068, Folder 571.1/9, Lázaro Cárdenas papers, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN). On Beteta’s extended career in Mexican politics, see Roderic Ai Camp, *Mexican Political Biographies, 1935-1993*, 3rd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 77-78.

² Wickard diary, July 5 – 22, 1942, Box 20, Claude Wickard papers, FDRL.

Farm and Home Hour” to his Mexican experiences. “Perhaps the thing that impressed me most about the Mexican farmer,” Wickard told listeners across the United States, “was his industriousness. All members of the family work and it seemed to me all the time.” He also described “the effort that has been made by the Mexican Government to restore the land to the people who work on the land,” as their holdings had come “into the hands of very large land owners.” All in all, the Mexican experiment “in some instances is like our Farm Security program. Needless to say, the people on the land are very happy to have the Government take this action.” Many of his listeners could certainly sympathize.³

At their peak of reform, between 1937 and 1943, a diverse array of state and non-state actors on both sides of the U.S-Mexican border came to understand themselves as joined in a common project. From the links established during the early New Deal and Plan Sexenal, the agrarian dialogue between Mexico and the United States flourished in the years that followed. That transnational conversation was the product of separate national and domestic developments. In the United States, the New Deal’s architects dramatically expanded their rural campaign in the wake of Roosevelt’s 1936 re-election, seeking to reverse the earlier conservatism of programs such as AAA. Leading the way, the Farm Security Administration sought a more egalitarian and prosperous American countryside, explicitly targeting the plantation complex of the American South and its culture of dependence. Actors outside of government, too, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, sought grassroots solidarity in pushing for an expansion of the New Deal’s promises to the most marginal of rural people. In Mexico, an even more aggressive change was occurring. With a marked escalation in the latter half of his six

³ “Our Good Neighbors in Mexico: An Address by Claude R. Wickard,” August 21, 1942, Box 47, Folder 2, Wickard papers, FDRL.

year-term, Lázaro Cárdenas would ultimately redistribute forty-five million acres to smallholders, more than all preceding administrations combined since the constitution of 1917. His successor, Manuel Avila Camacho, slowed the pace of redistribution but escalated campaigns to endow *ejidatarios* with credit, irrigation, and basic technologies, arguably of equal importance to the revolutionary agrarian project.

Rural reformers in each nation did not just coolly observe the other's successes and failures from a distance; they frequently traveled to witness them in person. Borrowing the concept of the "political pilgrim" from Paul Hollander and Helen Delpar, this chapter examines how the act of travel and the crossing of borders – both physical, intellectual, and ideological ones – would reshape reformers' thinking about rural justice and the health of the countryside. Scholars have long looked to travel narratives for insight into the societies that attracted visitors, but I believe that political pilgrimages reveal more about the pilgrims themselves and the societies that spawned them. While Paul Hollander's influential work on American visitors to the Soviet Union sought to prove that alienation at home prompted the flight of pilgrims abroad, in the U.S. of the 1930s it was also those who felt emboldened by domestic liberal rhetoric that reached out to make alliances with kindred reformers beyond their borders. Likewise, the Mexican and American governments' management of foreign interest in their political campaigns speaks volumes about what sorts of messages state leaders wanted to disseminate on the global stage. Just as Soviet hosts of foreign visitors had done in the 1920s, those who came to see the New Deal and the Plan Sexenal at work were shown very specific accomplishments that reinforced carefully cultivated national narratives.⁴

⁴ Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of All*

In highlighting the importance of American agrarian intellectuals' dialogue with their Mexican equivalents and their frequent comparison of U.S. southern and Mexican problems in the late 1930s and early 1940s, I do not mean to suggest that this was the first or only time that cosmopolitan thought impacted rural politics or policymaking in the United States. As a number of scholars – notably Daniel Rodgers – have demonstrated, American intellectuals in the first third of the twentieth century frequently traveled to and drew inspiration from Western European experiments in social planning, and influences from Paris, Berlin, and London continued to have significant impact during the New Deal years. Nevertheless, American agrarian liberals' fascination with Mexico in the 1930s and early 1940s represented a significant departure from previous patterns of cosmopolitan borrowing, in that reformers of that era were drawing inspiration from a predominantly non-white, formerly (neo)colonial nation known for its revolutionary politics. Mexico was therefore not the only foreign example that U.S. agrarian reformers looked to in this turbulent era, but that nation was exceptional in its positioning within global power relationships.⁵

What compelled agrarian pilgrims from the United States and Mexico to learn from the experience of the other was not an overactive imagination but the strikingly similar structural problems that each confronted in their respective countrysides. Especially in the post-1937 period, as each state adopted a more aggressive stance on agrarian issues, *land* and *credit* emerged as the two central problems that lay at the core

Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992). My understanding of border crossings as not only physical is drawn from Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

of rural inequality and social division. In the American Cotton Belt and across Mexico, land tenure was deeply skewed and the vast majority of those who worked on the land did so not as owners but as renters, tenants, peons, sharecroppers, and day laborers. The rural masses' frustration with their economic marginalization had been the engine behind the Mexican Revolution and the U.S. southern Populist movement, but demands for a more equitable distribution of land remained unfulfilled at the beginning of the 1930s. Of equal importance to land was credit, which kept non-owners in a perpetually subservient role. Because neither sharecroppers nor *ejido* farmers could mortgage their land or use it as collateral, they were bound to bankers and merchants who oversaw what crops were to be planted and what prices their harvests would bring. Agrarian reformers in each nation imagined that an aggressive attack on the twin problems of land and credit had the potential of rapidly transforming the countryside, and it would largely be around those issues that the dialogue of the late 1930s and early 1940s would revolve.⁶

This chapter will illustrate four examples of political tourism both north and south of the border. First, I will describe the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union's gaze toward Mexico, which culminated in a 1939 journey by its leaders to tour cotton *ejidos* in northern Mexico. Secondly, I will examine the Mexican travels of agrarian bureaucrats serving in the New Deal government. Third, I will explore how in 1942 some of these same U.S. bureaucrats sought to bring former Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas to the American South for a tour of New Deal projects in rural rehabilitation. While that trip's

⁶ My understanding of the commonalities in land and credit problems in the American South and Mexico is largely the product of an earlier comparative study, Roger L. Ransom, and Kerry Ann Odell, "Land and Credit: Some Historical Parallels between Mexico and the American South," *Agricultural History* 60, no. 1 (1986), which describes mutual problems, along with Warren C. Whately, "*Ejido* or Private Property: Mexican and American Ways out of Rural Backwardness," *Agricultural History* 60, no. 1 (1986), which emphasizes the divergence of solutions to those problems. Both articles are comparative, however, and do not discuss the dialogue between agrarian reformers in each of these places.

planning was ultimately unsuccessful, dozens of less renowned Mexican agronomists and government agents did cross the border in this era to study the efforts of the Farm Security Administration, Tennessee Valley Authority, and Soil Conservation Service in the U.S. South. The fourth and final section of the chapter will examine these American pilgrimages and the ways that Mexican agronomists' observations across the border impacted state projects of rural development in Mexico.

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in La Laguna

In the summer of 1934, just months before Frank Tannenbaum made his automobile trip across the cotton South, black and white landless farmers came together in Tyronza, in eastern Arkansas, to form the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). Furious over their exclusion from federal assistance programs and at planters' power to subvert their hopes for the New Deal, the Arkansas farmers hoped to use class solidarity to force compromises out of their employers, with the ultimate goal of acquiring land of their own. Two white men, H.L. Mitchell and Howard Kester, who had long been active in radical politics and the Socialist Party of America, soon rose to the leadership of the organization, though their political beliefs did not always reflect those of its rank-and-file. Over the course of the next few years, the STFU expanded across the cotton South as it organized strikes to secure wage raises. Just as importantly, its leadership sought to generate national publicity for their cause, and succeeded in doing so mainly through press reporting on the violent backlash of planters and their allies, who showed little mercy in their attempt to crush the Union. Yet even beyond the external challenges posed

by its enemies, the STFU was torn by internal racial prejudice and ineffective organization, and many of its early victories were more symbolic than real.⁷

The public support generated by the Union, however, undoubtedly played some role in pushing the White House to reconsider rural issues after the election of 1936. Historians ubiquitously link the militarization of the Arkansas sharecroppers with the leftward turn in the rural New Deal, whether deserved or not. But among the STFU leadership, the re-election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 was no cause for celebration, as many had supported the Socialist Party candidate Norman Thomas. Especially dismayed was Clarence Senior, a long-time STFU collaborator who had also served as Norman Thomas's presidential campaign manager that year. Senior was a young Missourian, and saw in the early years of the Great Depression a tangible opportunity for a left-wing political revolution in the United States. Roosevelt's landslide re-election, coupled with a string of recent setbacks for the STFU, left Senior deeply bitter, and he wrote to STFU leader H.L. Mitchell a month after the election to express his frustration. "I am going to Mexico," he told Mitchell, "at least for a couple of months, because I need a real change of climate." Like Tannenbaum a decade earlier, Senior saw in Mexico the opportunity to witness social reforms that were only dreamed of in the United States.⁸

Mitchell was highly positive about his colleague's decision, and hoped to involve the STFU in Senior's trip abroad. Mitchell himself had recently been contacted by the largest Mexican labor union, the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos

⁷ See especially Jason Manthorne, "The View from the Cotton: Reconsidering the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *Agricultural History* 84, no. 1 (2010). Donald Grubbs' *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) was for many years the most-read volume on the STFU, but it glossed over the internal problems and contradictions of the Union for the sake of celebrating its biracialism.

⁸ Clarence Senior to H.L. Mitchell, December 9, 1936, Reel 3, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers (microfilm), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter STFUP).

(Confederation of Mexican Workers), receiving information from them about the progress of land reform in the northern cotton-growing region of the Comarca Lagunera, or Laguna district, and Mitchell related that information to Senior. The Laguna zone was the multi-state cotton belt that spanned the northern Mexican states of Coahuila and Durango. In September of 1936, just months before Senior contemplated his trip, a successful strike by cotton pickers had brought President Cárdenas into the region with promises of land reform to defuse a potentially bloody confrontation between workers and landowners. In resolving the strike with land grants, Cárdenas sought to make the Laguna region, one of the wealthiest agricultural zones of Mexico, into the flagship demonstration of his nascent land reform campaign. Unlike earlier attempts at land redistribution which had often deeded dry or rocky plots to *ejidatarios*, the Comarca Lagunera was composed of irrigated, fertile, and highly productive land, owned by wealthy and politically connected landlords. “Some 1,500,000 acres of cotton lands have been taken over by the Cardenas government and turned over to the cotton workers,” marveled Mitchell to Senior. “We would greatly appreciate it if you could get facts, etc. about this program and let us have a first hand report,” Mitchell told his colleague, offering Senior official credentials as a representative of the STFU.⁹

Reading further on the recent developments in La Laguna, Senior grew ever more enthusiastic about the proposed trip. “From what I can see so far it looks more like the Bankhead bill than anything else,” he told Mitchell in mid-December, unconsciously tying Frank Tannenbaum’s legislation, then before consideration in the House of Representatives, to the Mexican land reform. Like Tannenbaum, Senior and Mitchell viewed what was happening in Mexico through a U.S. southern lens and as a potential

⁹ Mitchell to Senior, December 11, 1936, Reel 3, STFUP.



Figure 3.1. Location of the Laguna zone within Mexico. The Comarca Lagunera was one of the wealthiest agricultural regions in the country (from www.comarcalagunera.com)

political tool for the STFU. Accepting Mitchell's offer to serve as a representative of the Union in Mexico, Senior suggested to the STFU leader that if he found the Laguna project as fascinating as he expected, he would try to write and publish "a comparison of sharecropper conditions with the conditions of the cotton workers in the Laguna region."¹⁰ Mitchell agreed. "Surely a story about the cotton workers of Mexico contrasted with our people ought to be timely," Mitchell told Senior, as he wrote to his union contacts in the Laguna to tell them of Senior's upcoming voyage.¹¹

Torreón, Coahuila, the largest urban center of the Laguna region and Senior's destination, was located several hours by train southwest from the border at Nuevo Laredo. As Senior entered the region by rail, he would have seen beyond his window vast cotton plantations stretching across the land between the Nazas and Aguanaval rivers, streams that fed an intricate system of irrigation canals that seeped life into the dry

¹⁰ Senior to Mitchell, December 14, 1936, Reel 3, STFUP.

¹¹ Mitchell to Senior, December 16, 1936, Reel 3, STFUP. Mitchell's letter to the Mexican labor organizers can be found in Mitchell to the "Federación De Trabajadores De La Region Lagunera" [sic], December 16, 1936, Reel 3, STFUP.

region. The Comarca Lagunera had been the site of extensive capital investment in the late nineteenth century, as U.S, European, and Mexican investors sought to build a cotton kingdom not unlike that of the Gulf South. One U.S. company had even tried to import a large African-American labor force during the 1890s, but a smallpox outbreak sent survivors fleeing back to Alabama. In the early years of the Revolution's aftermath, the region's large landowners had successfully dodged threats of land redistribution, as the government's commitment to land reform remained rhetorical and only aimed at marginal lands. But with the ascent of Cárdenas and the concomitant militarization of agricultural labor in the region, La Laguna's *hacendados* faced a serious challenge. The September 1936 strike brought an earlier simmer to a rolling boil, and Cárdenas, arriving to the region to resolve the strike, promised to subdivide the zone's plantations and distribute them to eligible *peones acasillados*, or resident laborers. Accompanying the land redistribution was a vast, government-directed plan of cooperative and collective cultivation, along with inexpensive loans through the National Bank of Ejidal Credit (BNCE). Rather than seeking to foster subsistence-oriented farming, as was often how U.S. contemporaries understood it, Cárdenas saw the Laguna model as a stepping-stone to commercial production by smallholders, not unlike the USDA's plans for Farm Security Administration communities.¹²

¹² On the politics of land reform and agricultural development in the Laguna region, see particularly Mikael Wolfe, "Water and Revolution: The Politics, Ecology and Technology of Agrarian Reform in 'La Laguna,' Mexico," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2009), especially Chapter 5, along with Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 123-129, and Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 37-38. On the failed attempt to colonize the region with black labor, see Karl Jacoby, "Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African-American Colony of 1895," in *Continental Crossroads: New Directions in Borderlands History*, eds. Elliott Young and Samuel Truett (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Senior, predictably, was astounded when he arrived to the Laguna zone. Speaking to government agents and workers, touring the region's cotton farms, and visiting schools, Senior soon became a fixture in Torreón. His weeks there turned into months, as he trafficked back and forth between the Laguna zone and a new apartment in Mexico City. "The region is one of the most thrilling spots in the world to anyone who wants to see a new world built on release from slavery," he gushed to STFU organizer J.R. Butler. "Most of the problems are just about the same thing one runs into in the South."¹³ Senior even felt compelled to write to Cárdenas about the hemispheric importance of the land reform project, and the transnational solidarity that it inspired. "Here [in the U.S.] we are fighting with joined arms for the resolution of agrarian problems very similar to those in Mexico," he told the Mexican president in the summer of 1938. "Our 'sharecroppers' are your *peones acasillados*." While clearly simplifying questions of race and class between the two regions, Senior saw deep commonalities in their rural struggles.¹⁴

Yet Senior wanted to show his U.S. colleagues more than just flowery rhetoric; he wanted to show them the Laguna region itself and the possibilities that it suggested. In the spring of 1939, as the STFU saw its membership dwindling in response to the New Deal's rhetorical co-optation of its demands, Senior decided to organize a conference in Torreón and invite dozens of activists concerned with the plight of the southern sharecropper. "We might utilize the current interest in southern affairs and in Mexico," strategized Senior, "to secure some consideration of our approach to the solution of human problems connected with a cotton economy." As he envisioned it, over the course of a week American visitors would tour the Comarca Lagunera and discuss "what has

¹³ Senior to J.R. Butler, May 23, 1939, Reel 11, STFUP.

¹⁴ Senior to Lázaro Cárdenas, June 3, 1938, Box 458, Folder 433/296, Cárdenas papers, AGN.

been done in the cotton collective farm region in the light of problems of the [American] south and the New Deal's attempts to solve them.” His first invitees, predictably, were H.L. Mitchell and the leadership of the STFU, but Senior also approached southern academics, farm leaders, and even the administrative staff of the Farm Security Administration. With the cooperation of the National Bank of Ejidal Credit, Senior planned sessions for the first week of July, 1939. The conference was titled, with intentional irony, “Forty Acres and a Mule: Cooperative-Collective Farming.”¹⁵

Mitchell was enthusiastic about attending the conference, but fretted over the dire finances of the Union and whether they could afford to make the trip. After weeks of indecision, Mitchell ultimately decided to attend, deeming the trip important enough to risk financial ruin. With Mitchell came Farish Betton, the African-American vice president of the Union, and the two men traveled from Memphis to Torreón by rail in the last days of June 1939. Arriving, they found themselves in a land which “reminds one of the rich fertile lowland along the Mississippi River. Cotton grows just as high as in Eastern Arkansas.” The similarities didn’t end there. Absentee landowners in La Laguna, they noted, once owned the land there “just as they own the cotton plantations of Eastern Arkansas,” and the tillers of its soil were once “exploited and without hope as were Arkansas sharecroppers.” During the first five days of July, alongside Senior and two dozen other attendees, Mitchell and Betton toured *ejido* farms, met with workers, and inspected fields of cotton. They heard speeches on the history of Mexico’s Revolution and on the importance of the Constitution’s Article 27. On the last day, they helped lay

¹⁵ Senior, “Memo on suggested conference on the cotton labor problem,” February 27, 1939, Reel 10, STFUP. For invitation to the FSA staff, see H.R. to D.A. Young, June 16, 1939, Record Group (hereafter RG) 96: Records of the Farmers Home Administration and its Predecessors, Finding Aid PI-118, Entry 2, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD (hereafter NA).

the cornerstone of a new schoolhouse at the *Ejido* San Tomás, joining with the crowd for a “very beautiful” rendition of the “Corrido del Agrarista,” or “Song of the Agrarian.”¹⁶

Mitchell and Betton were deeply moved by the experience, and on their trip back to Memphis they reflected on how the trip forced them to rethink the role of state intervention in rural problems. “The government of the United States,” both agreed, “has not been as responsive to the plight of the sharecroppers as the Mexican government in its handling of the Mexican peasant problems.” Likewise, “the Farm Security Administration in the United States might well take some lessons from the National Credit Bank in Mexico.” While Mitchell and Betton did “not believe that we can work out our own problems just as the Mexican farmers are doing,” the Cardenista land reform project suggested to them possible avenues in crafting policy for the future. They too

should consider a legislative program of expropriating our absentee landlords by taxation on large individual holdings...When our Union is built strong enough to do this then we, who have plenty of rich, fertile land and no deserts to contend with, can show the Mexican farmers something.¹⁷

Yet their Union would never be “built strong enough” to make that demonstration possible. With their political power eroded by a sense that the New Deal was addressing rural inequality, and with their increasing inability to address the divisions of race within their shrinking membership, the STFU would never regain their former position of national influence. During the war, they turned their attention to the rights of migrant workers outside of the South, including activism on behalf of Mexican *bracero* workers after 1943, but they had little power in addressing the abuses common to that system. In the age of red-baiting that followed the war, the STFU was essentially erased from national memory. Clarence Senior, however, remained in Mexico for several years, and

¹⁶ H.L. Mitchell and Farish Betton, “Land and Liberty for Mexican Farmers,” July 1939, reel 12, STFUP.

¹⁷ Ibid.

would host three more Laguna conferences during the summers of 1940, 1941, and 1942. The year after Mitchell and Betton came down to Torreón, Senior published a book on the region titled *Democracy Comes to a Cotton Kingdom: The Story of Mexico's La Laguna*, in which he boldly claimed that the success of the Laguna model “will not only hold aloft a torch for the millions of landless peasants in all the Latin American countries, but will also shed light on the sharecropper and tenant problem of the United States.”¹⁸

The “success” of the Laguna experiment, though, lay in the eye of the beholder. While the region continued to produce cotton wealth for some time and served as a prominent showcase for the possibilities of marrying irrigation and mechanization to socially conscious land use planning, its recipe for success was hardly sustainable. Environmental historian Mikael Wolfe has argued that the Mexican state’s decision to hitch rural social justice to dam-building and cheap irrigation in the Comarca Lagunera was a short-sighted solution to much deeper economic and environmental problems. Redistributing water, state planners found, was even more difficult than redistributing land, and natural ecosystems did not respond predictably to state visions of control and linearity.¹⁹ When dams built during the 1940s upset the fragile ecology that had made the region productive, and as excessive irrigation from the water table rapidly increased soil salinity, the *ejidatarios* of the Laguna, like millions of others across Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s, left their lands for the slums of Mexican and U.S. cities.²⁰

¹⁸ Clarence Senior, *Democracy Comes to a Cotton Kingdom: The Story of Mexico's La Laguna* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Pedagógicos e Hispanoamericanos, 1940), 45, accessed at the Biblioteca Nacional, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City.

¹⁹ For the most evocative portrayal of the failure of state planning in the natural environment, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Wolfe, “Water and Revolution.”

While it demonstrated a striking moment of pan-American leftist solidarity, the STFU's engagement with the Comarca Lagunera in 1939 would not dramatically reshape policy in either nation. Yet H.L. Mitchell, Farish Betton, and Clarence Senior were only a handful of the many agrarian intellectuals who traveled to Mexico in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Other Americans who crossed the border were far better placed within the New Deal political machine. Next, I examine the Mexican pilgrimages of four top rural policymakers in the U.S. government, and how their voyages would reshape their thinking on national and international agricultural reform.

U.S. Agrarian Bureaucrats in Cárdenas' Mexico

When Franklin Roosevelt came to the White House in 1933, he brought with him a host of highly educated and ideologically driven advisers that would become the intellectual architects of the New Deal administration. These "Brain Trusters," men and women like Frances Perkins, Adolf Berle, Harry Hopkins, and Harold Ickes, along with dozens of other less-senior bureaucrats, represented a dramatically different approach to policy-making than previous administrations. Deeply critical of unbridled laissez-faire economics, they sought to merge state regulation with the principles of social and economic science in forging a more equitable and balanced capitalism. Within the Department of Agriculture, the scientific planning impulse was especially strong. The men that Frank Tannenbaum had met in late 1934 when he brought his land redistribution bill to Washington – Secretary Henry A. Wallace, Undersecretary Rexford Tugwell, and adviser M.L. Wilson – each embodied the Brain Trust's instincts toward scientific rationalization of the messy realities of agriculture and farm life. While this liberal wing

of the USDA differed in the degrees to which they romanticized the social benefits of rural living and small-scale farming, nearly all of them shared a commitment to reconstructing the American farm economy along more equitable lines. But if scholars have thoroughly examined the link between the ideologies of these agrarian intellectuals and national policy, few studies have examined their deep internationalism. During the Roosevelt years, many of these USDA planners looked to other nations' experiments in rural reform, frequently traveling abroad to witness those results in person. Their geographical imagination and curiosity was wide and varied and took them across the world, but particularly notable was their fascination with Mexico, the only major non-European source of foreign inspiration.²¹

The first such pilgrimage south of the border was that of Rexford Tugwell, the Columbia University economist who served as Under-Secretary of Agriculture between 1933 and 1935 and then administrator of the Resettlement Administration from 1935 to 1936. While Tugwell's first visit to Mexico had been in the summer of 1932, on a brief vacation during the election year, it would first be in the fall of 1935 that he traveled with political motives. Just a few months after being given control of the Resettlement Administration, Tugwell announced that he would travel to Mexico City with Paul Appleby, the assistant to Secretary Wallace, and a team of USDA scientists with the nominal purpose of observing control of the Mexican fruit fly and pink cotton

²¹ Studies of the political ideology of the New Deal USDA are many in number. Most essential are Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982), Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Jess Gilbert, *Democrats or Bureaucrats? Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal in Agriculture* (forthcoming).

bollworm.²² Given Tugwell's political reputation as a radical and his lack of any training in entomology, the trip must have raised some eyebrows. When notified of the visit, even Ambassador Josephus Daniels prodded Tugwell for the true motivation behind his trip, as "no man in public office in the United States can come here unless some particular motive is attributed to him."²³ The Mexican ambassador to Washington, Francisco Castillo Nájera, was equally aware of the political purposes of Tugwell's trip. "I suspect he means to take advantage of his journey to consider the agrarian question," the ambassador wrote the week before Tugwell's visit.²⁴

Daniels and Castillo Nájera, of course, were correct. Tugwell was "looking forward to this as a period of rest as well as valuable education," he admitted to Daniels before leaving.²⁵ In their two weeks in Mexico City, Tugwell and Appleby had a chance to meet with most of the leading figures in the Partido Nacional Revolucionario and to join them on inspections of rural communities outside of Mexico City. Daniels was much amused to witness Tugwell's delight at the experience. "I wish you could have seen him last night," Daniels wrote that week to his friend Henry Wallace, "exchanging views with General [Saturnino] Cedillo, the Minister of Agriculture, and Mr. [Emilio] Portes Gil, President of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario... They got along famously through an interpreter, and I think they came to the conclusion that much of our New Deal and the Mexican Six-Year Plan have much in common."²⁶ In his diary, Daniels noted that

²² Henry Wallace to Cordell Hull, September 25, 1935, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-I, Box 2170, Folder 1, NA.

²³ Daniels to Tugwell, November 6, 1935, General Correspondence, Reel 64, Daniels papers, LoC.

²⁴ Francisco Castillo Nájera to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, September 27, 1935, Clasificación Topográfica III-313-11, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Tlatelolco, Mexico City (hereafter AHSRE).

²⁵ Tugwell to Daniels, September 27, 1935, General Correspondence, Reel 64, Daniels papers, LoC.

²⁶ Daniels to Henry A. Wallace, October 11, 1935, Special Correspondence, Reel 63, Daniels papers, LoC.

Tugwell and his Mexican compatriots “talked at length about the common aims” of their respective rural reform programs.²⁷

Tugwell’s 1935 experience in Mexico fostered a strong interest in that nation’s land reform experiment, and he would continue to advocate for attention to Mexican models during his time in the USDA and beyond. As Cárdenas intensified land redistribution in 1936 and 1937, Tugwell pushed his New Deal colleagues to turn their gaze southward. “If you will look into [Cárdenas’ program],” Tugwell wrote Wallace in August 1937, “I think you will be as moved by the great effort being made as I have been, whether or not it should be successful.”²⁸ That same month, he sent to President Roosevelt newsletters from the Partido Nacional Revolucionario on land reform in Yucatán, as a suggestion in planning the strategic approach of the newly created Farm Security Administration.²⁹ But perhaps most important in Tugwell’s observations of Mexico was his later tenure as the last appointed colonial governor of Puerto Rico, a post he held from 1941 to 1946. In San Juan, Tugwell broke dramatically with his colonial predecessors, engineering a transition to independent government and free elections. He also pioneered a land reform and agricultural diversification program mirrored on the agrarian New Deal and quite likely Mexico, the other Latin American country in which he had studied the problems of land tenure. What he had learned in the U.S. South and Mexico would thus echo across the Caribbean basin in later years.³⁰

²⁷ Daniels diary, October 11, 1935, Diaries, Reel 6, Daniels papers, LoC.

²⁸ Tugwell to Henry A. Wallace, August 31, 1937, RG 96, Finding Aid PI-118, Entry 1, Box 6, Folder AD-070 Mexico, NA.

²⁹ Tugwell to Roosevelt, August 26, 1937, FDR papers, President’s Personal File 564, FDRL.

³⁰ The influence of New Deal policy on Puerto Rico, as well as Tugwell’s governorship, are rather understudied topics, considering the long-time importance of Puerto Rico as a laboratory for U.S. development projects abroad. See Michael Namorato, *Rexford G. Tugwell: A Biography* (New York: Praeger, 1988), Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers

Tugwell's steps into Mexico were retraced two years later by Mordecai Ezekiel, the chief economic adviser to the USDA and a leading figure in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. In September of 1937, after completing a tour of USDA projects in the U.S. South, Ezekiel drove down to Mexico City with the purpose of learning of the "principal economic problems with which Mexico is dealing in the field of agriculture," and wrote to Ambassador Daniels to arrange meetings with the major leaders in agricultural and agrarian reform.³¹ Like Tugwell before him, Ezekiel accompanied representatives of the Mexican Secretariat of Agriculture on a tour of rural destinations near Mexico City, including the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo, in the state of México. In a letter from Mexico City, Ezekiel wrote to his friend and USDA collaborator Paul Appleby that "just like us, [the Mexicans] have a whole series of overlapping agencies dealing with various phases of farm problems," emphasizing the Mexican state's "irrigation work and agrarian settlements."³²

Yet where Tugwell had marveled at Mexican agrarianism for its potential U.S. implications, the conclusion Ezekiel drew from his visit lay in how much Mexico could benefit from the assistance of the New Deal agricultural agencies. What Mexico needed most in the wake of land redistribution, Ezekiel believed, was to increase the production of the *ejidos*. "Where large tracts of land are being divided and placed in the hands of individual settlers," he wrote to Milo Perkins of the Farm Security Administration after his trip, "agricultural extension work will be helpful in aiding those settlers to make the most effective use of their tracts." With the assistance of U.S. experts, believed Ezekiel,

University Press, 1964), and Rexford Tugwell, *The Stricken Land: The Story of Puerto Rico* (New York: Doubleday, 1946).

³¹ Mordecai Ezekiel to Josephus Daniels, September 27, 1937, General Correspondence, Reel 70, Daniels papers, LoC.

³² Ezekiel to Appleby, October 24, 1937, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-I, Box 2550, Folder 6, NA.

the *ejidatarios* could become efficient agricultural producers. Rather than a threat to the *ejido*, Ezekiel thought that American agricultural science could bolster Mexico's agrarian revolution. Such a program would even "parallel what we are doing in this country in the way of rural rehabilitation supervisors for our rural rehabilitation clients." Ezekiel's interest in a cooperative program in Mexican agriculture, however, was short-lived, and he did not pursue it past 1938.³³

For others in the USDA, though, engagement with Mexican agricultural reform would have far more lasting and transformative effects. In December of 1938, M.L. Wilson undertook his pilgrimage south of the border. Wilson, who had served as both Assistant Secretary and Undersecretary of Agriculture during the 1930s, had also been Tannenbaum's main ally within the USDA in the early days of drafting the Bankhead tenant bill. Wilson's Mexican trip was planned in preparation for the second Inter-American Conference on Agriculture, and his official mission was to "improv[e] and expan[d] the facilities for the interchange between the interested persons of both countries."³⁴ Arriving in Mexico City, Wilson met President Cárdenas and his agricultural staff in a public ceremony that demonstrated to the U.S. visitors "Mexico's attempt to establish a collective cultivation of the land," as one Mexican newspaper described the event.³⁵ Over the course of several days, Wilson and Mexican Secretary of

³³ Ezekiel to Milo Perkins, July 6, 1938, RG 96, Finding Aid PI-118, Entry 1, Box 6, Folder AD-070 Mexico, NA.

³⁴ Donald Blaisdell to Pedro d'Alba, December 3, 1938, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-J, Box 2789, Folder 1, NA.

³⁵ "México expuso su programa agrícola al subsecretario Wilson, de Estados Unidos," *Excelsior*, December 20, 1938.

Agriculture José Parrés discussed the future of Mexican agriculture, weighing the *ejido* model against that of larger, private farmers.³⁶

Perhaps even more so than Tugwell, Wilson was captivated by Mexico and the nation's agrarian revolution. "To tell you the truth," he wrote to a USDA colleague after returning, "I am anxious to go back again and make a longer trip."³⁷ "I realize more than I ever did before what a wonderful country and civilization Mexico has," he wrote another friend, "and how [we who] live in the United States should understand it [and] the recent social and economic movements that are taking place."³⁸ Like Ezekiel, he was moved toward increasing the contact between agricultural experts in the United States and those in Mexico. But unlike Ezekiel's confident teachers, Wilson's ambassadors would arrive as students. Just years before the dawn of U.S.-led global "development," Wilson imagined a more flexible role for U.S. missionaries abroad. In order to ease "relations with countries like Mexico," he wrote to an American friend, "it is up to us to understand these countries and assist them to develop their culture and arrive at a self-expression of what is in them rather than to expect to force our culture and our ideas upon them."³⁹ In the months that came, Wilson and a sympathetic Secretary of Agriculture Wallace pushed for the resources to begin such a program of equal exchange in strategies of agricultural improvement between the two nations, but conservative State Department

³⁶ On Wilson and Parrés' conversations, see Pierre de L. Boal to Cordell Hull, January 6, 1939, RG 59: Records of the State Department, 102.7502/93, Box 145, Folder 2, NA.

³⁷ M.L. Wilson to A.C. Baker, January 10, 1939, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-J, Box 3121, Folder 3, NA.

³⁸ Wilson to José Figueroa, January 12, 1939, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-J, Box 3122, Folder 1, NA.

³⁹ Wilson to A.C. Baker, January 10, 1939, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-J, Box 3121, Folder 3, NA.

officials were reluctant to begin any serious partnership before Cárdenas was out of office.⁴⁰

Ultimately, Wilson had little success in coordinating a U.S.-Mexican cooperative agricultural program, though he would play a role in the establishment of the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican Agricultural Program in 1943 (see Chapter Four). However, Wilson's career in global rural planning was only then beginning. He would later join the ranks of the many New Dealers who took their agrarian ideology abroad in the years after World War II. After serving as the head of the USDA Extension Service during the 1940s, Wilson left the United States to work on similar projects in India and Pakistan during the era of Point IV development. The lessons he learned from rural poverty in the 1930s United States and Mexico would inspire his firm belief that scientific planning combined with balanced social politics could uplift the most "backward" societies.⁴¹

While most of the U.S. agrarian intellectuals to travel to Mexico in the New Deal era came from the ranks of the USDA, other federal agencies concerned with rural America also looked inquisitively to Mexico. One such example was the late 1940 pilgrimage to central Mexico by Norman Littell of the U.S. Justice Department. Littell was a young lawyer from Indiana with a rather unusual career. Unlike many others in government, Littell had worked for years as a seaman and timber feller in the Pacific Northwest, where he had cultivated a strong sympathy for workers' struggles. After earning his law degree, he joined the New Deal Justice Department in 1936, where his

⁴⁰ On Wilson's push to begin a program of mutual cooperation, see Laurence Duggan to Cordell Hull, May 3, 1939, RG 59, 811.61212/233, Box 5189, Folder 3, NA, and Donald Blaisdell to Laurence Duggan, May 5, 1939, RG 59, 811.61212/234, Box 5189, Folder 3, NA.

⁴¹ On Wilson's global career, see Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, 250-251. Many of the later, global careers of the agrarian New Dealers are understudied, and Wilson is no exception. See forthcoming works by Daniel Immerwahr and Amrys Williams for Wilson's importance abroad.

liberal politics and alliances with like-minded New Dealers such as Henry Wallace propelled him upwards in the Department's ranks. In April 1939, he was appointed Assistant Attorney General, but even more importantly, Littell was also named chief of the Lands Division of the Justice Department. Employing hundreds of attorneys, the Lands Division was responsible for all federal land purchases and condemnations, including management of Indian reservations in the American West. In an era of unprecedented government involvement in land use and planning, Littell thus held a position of considerable importance.⁴²

Along with several other U.S. federal representatives, Littell traveled to Mexico City in December of 1940 to attend the inauguration of Cárdenas' presidential successor, Manuel Avila Camacho. It was Littell's first visit to the nation, and learning of the Revolution during the carefully orchestrated inauguration ceremonies enraptured the left-leaning lawyer. Littell met Cárdenas, Avila Camacho, and Josephus Daniels. He toured the grounds of the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo with the incoming secretary of agriculture, Marte R. Gómez, whose "enlightening comments as to the redistribution of agricultural lands" and the "improving conditions among the small farmers of Mexico" fascinated Littell.⁴³ Over the course of the week in Mexico City, the young lawyer came to firmly support the leveling vision of the agrarian revolution. Upon returning to the United States, Littell wrote to his friend Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., with the motive of getting his father's immediate ear. Echoing Daniels, Littell counseled that the U.S. State Department must be flexible in dealing with the legal aspects of Mexican land

⁴² On Littell's life and political career, see Jonathan Dembo, "Introduction," in Norman M. Littell, *My Roosevelt Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987).

⁴³ Norman Littell to Marte R. Gómez, January 2, 1941, Cartas, 1941, I-P, Archivo Marte R. Gómez, Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico City (hereafter AMRG).

expropriation. Yet Littell also drew American lessons from the Mexican example, since “a redistribution of land will some day be inevitable in our country.” Mexico and the United States shared a “tragic problem”: the “dispossessed hordes of our agricultural population with no land to live on and no place to go.” “We New Dealers,” Littell wrote to Franklin and his father, who later read the letter, “can understand what the Mexican Government is up to in tackling these basic problems.”⁴⁴

Littell’s words of praise for Mexican politics were not merely rhetorical, but would also influence his tenure as chief of the Department of Justice’s Lands Division. From 1939 to 1944, when Littell resigned from his post because of growing antagonism with Attorney General Francis Biddle, he oversaw the government purchase of more than twenty million acres of land from private owners, much of it in the American West. Much of this purchased land went toward the construction of state parks, but some also to the expansion of Indian reservations. Littell’s advocacy for Native American groups, possibly inspired by his visit to Mexico, continued after his exit from federal service. In the late 1940s and 1950s, he served as the legal counsel for the Navajo Tribe in their quest to gain greater federal support and land holdings in the West.⁴⁵

Littell, Tugwell, Ezekiel, Wilson, and Claude Wickard – the USDA Secretary whose 1942 visit was described in this chapter’s introduction – each traveled to Mexico during the New Deal era to observe Mexico’s parallel experiment in rural reform.

Arriving to Mexico City and touring the countryside around it, these pilgrims selectively

⁴⁴ Littell to Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., December 16, 1940, PSF, Box 44, Folder 2, FDR papers, FDRL.

⁴⁵ See Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), Kenneth Philp, *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination, 1933 – 1953* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), and Dembo, “Introduction,” in Littell, *My Roosevelt Years*. Because these land purchase campaigns occurred during the War rather than during the “traditional” New Deal of the 1930s, they have been studied far less.

observed that which reinforced their own beliefs in rural rehabilitation. Deeply utilitarian, each of them read Mexican politics through the skewed lenses of the world they knew in Washington, and sought models that made sense to American politics. *Ejidatarios* stood in as tenant farmers, haciendas as plantations, and Cárdenas' *agrarismo* resembled to them a more muscular Farm Security Administration. Just as Frank Tannenbaum had done in the earlier years of the New Deal with the Bankhead bill, they digested complex Mexican realities for the sake of shaking up an American political environment that they saw as restrictive. Their successes in doing so, however, were limited, especially as national politics turned rightward and the agrarian dreamers under Henry Wallace's wing were increasingly marginalized. Nevertheless, acknowledging that Mexican models carried considerable weight among the top ranks of Washington policymakers seriously challenges the standard interpretation that Mexico, and Latin America writ large, was only a passive recipient of political and intellectual frameworks in the twentieth century.

The New Deal's internationalism, however, flowed in two directions. This chapter and the last have already demonstrated that U.S. agrarian intellectuals were eager to look beyond their nation's borders in seeking models and formulas for American rural reform. Yet they were equally anxious to broadcast their own successes and strategies outward beyond their borders, hoping, with more than a touch of evangelicalism, that their own solutions to economic inequality might be equally applicable to other parts of the world. The second half of this chapter examines the way that the leadership of the rural New Deal sought to serve as a teacher to the Mexican revolutionaries, even while it simultaneously studied below them.

A Cárdenas Trip to the United States

To the Americans who romantically looked to Mexico during the interwar and wartime years, no figure stood taller in the pantheon of the agrarian Mexican Revolution than Lázaro Cárdenas. In their collective imagination, Cárdenas was the redeemer of the Revolution, the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of poor rural Mexicans, and the architect of the land reform experiment. No one did more in the U.S. public sphere to cultivate the otherworldly image of the Mexican president than Frank Tannenbaum, who published a series of essays in popular U.S. magazines about Cárdenas and his unique style of governance. During the late 1930s, Tannenbaum became a close confidante of Cárdenas, and in the summer of 1937, he accompanied Cárdenas across northern Mexico by car and horseback for two full months on a tour of rural communities. Describing their trip to readers of *Survey Graphic* in August of 1937, Tannenbaum wrote that he observed a president “so completely disinterested, so devoted to the public good, and so determined to re-shape the basis of Mexican social and political life.”⁴⁶

Just as Tannenbaum wanted to communicate to American liberals the successes of the Mexican Revolution and Cárdenas’ personal role in realizing them, he also, throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, sought to demonstrate to Cárdenas the New Deal’s similar achievements in the United States. Their two-month trip together in northern Mexico, after all, came immediately in the wake of the Bankhead bill’s passage, and it is quite likely that Tannenbaum was eager to compare and contrast Mexican and American approaches to land reform. In the following years, Tannenbaum served as Cárdenas’ personal interpreter of the late New Deal, particularly emphasizing the work of

⁴⁶ Frank Tannenbaum, “Cárdenas: That Is the Way He Is,” August 1937, *Survey Graphic*, 425-427.

the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Farm Security Administration.⁴⁷ But just as Clarence Senior had believed of La Laguna, words alone were insufficient: Tannenbaum wanted to show Cárdenas what the rural New Deal actually looked like. In early 1939, Tannenbaum first invited Cárdenas to consider a visit to the United States, with the purpose of getting to know that country better. In proposing such a trip, Tannenbaum was working in unison with the liberal wing of the State Department, who hoped that Cárdenas' visit might help to defuse diplomatic tensions over Mexico's 1938 expropriation of American- and British-owned oil wells in the Gulf and the continuing redistribution of American-owned land across Mexico. But in the highly nationalist and often anti-American mood of late 1930s Mexico, where partnership with the United States carried heavy political baggage, Cárdenas considered it too risky to travel north of the border.⁴⁸

Only after Cárdenas left office in 1940, and due to an unexpected run-in of two old friends in Mexico City, would the push to bring Cárdenas to the United States be revived. That run-in would occur during the summer of 1942. That July, the Mexican Secretariat of Agriculture and Development hosted the second Inter-American Conference on Agriculture, with invitees arriving from nearly every nation in the Americas. The conference was the brain-child of the Mexican agriculture secretary under President Avila Camacho, Marte R. Gómez, a career agronomist who was deeply committed to wedding modern science and technology to the *ejido* project in order to

⁴⁷ There is no direct record of their conversations during that trip, but in later letters between the two friends Tannenbaum commonly refers to Cárdenas' long-standing interest in U.S. rural rehabilitation programs.

⁴⁸ Tannenbaum's first invitation for Cárdenas to visit the United States came in Tannenbaum to Lázaro Cárdenas, January 5, 1939, Series I, Box 1, Frank Tannenbaum papers, Columbia University Library (hereafter FTP).

make it more productive. The first Inter-American conference had taken place in 1930, and had been a politically neutral meeting of technicians and economists. In 1942, however, in the wake of Cardenismo and Mexico's increasingly prominent role in hemispheric leftist politics, Gómez sought to use the conference to broadcast his nation's dynamic approach to land reform as a model for other Latin American nations.⁴⁹

The largest foreign contingent at the conference, however, came not from south of Mexico but from the United States. Just like Gómez, the rural New Dealers, whose reform project was in many ways at its peak too in 1942, wanted to add their evangelical voices to the agrarian chorus in Mexico City.⁵⁰ The list of American attendees to the July 1942 conference reads like a who's who of the 1940s rural New Deal: Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard, Hugh Bennett of the Soil Conservation Service, George Mitchell of the Farm Security Administration, William Vogt of the Pan-American Union, and M.L. Wilson of the Extension Service. Mexico's representatives were just as renowned: Avila Camacho and future president Miguel Alemán each addressed the crowd, as did the nation's most prominent agronomists. During the week-long conference, the U.S. and Latin American attendees gave and heard speeches on the politics of land tenure, the societal dangers of soil erosion, and the provision of rural

⁴⁹ For Gómez's official declaration for the conference's agenda, which emphasized wealth and land distribution, soil conservation, soil fertility, and rural education, see Marte R. Gómez to the Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, November 7, 1941, Clasificación Topográfica III-759-1, AHSRE.

⁵⁰ Many scholars have assumed that with the beginning of World War II, the New Deal and its social agenda took a backseat to the war effort. Historian Bruce Schulman has argued instead that it was not so much that the New Deal slowed down but moved South, where agencies such as the Farm Security Administration and various agencies devoted to wage adjustment achieved their greatest successes. See Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

credit. Reporting to the State Department, the American embassy noted that the conference had a strong “political flavor.”⁵¹

Alongside the U.S. government representatives in Mexico City was the ever-present Frank Tannenbaum, eager to witness the intellectual exchange between the two nations that he knew best. On one of the first days of the conference, he ran into M.L. Wilson – a happy coincidence, for the two men had gotten to know each other well during their cooperation in 1935 on the Bankhead tenant bill. Over the course of the week, Tannenbaum and Wilson spent many hours together reliving the past while contemplating the course of rural reform in both nations. By week’s end, Wilson and Tannenbaum decided to join forces again, but toward a different goal: bringing Lázaro Cárdenas to the United States to tour the rural works of the New Deal. Such a pilgrimage, decided the two men, would tie a meaningful and symbolic knot between the United States and Mexico, which were then turning the corner from the tense diplomatic relations of the 1930s to the friendly cooperation of the wartime years. And in an era when the rural social reform projects of each nation was under siege, that trip would publicly illustrate the successes of both the New Deal and Cardenismo, contrary to the denunciations of their many detractors.⁵²

Convinced that Cárdenas would be interested in making the trip, after the conference’s end Tannenbaum visited the American Embassy in Mexico City to speak with George Messersmith, the conservative U.S. Ambassador who had replaced Josephus Daniels when his wife fell ill and prompted Daniels’ return to North Carolina in early

⁵¹ George Messersmith to Henry A. Wallace, July 16, 1942, Reel 23, Henry A. Wallace papers (Iowa microfilm, accessed at Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

⁵² Details on the Wilson-Tannenbaum rendezvous at the Mexico City conference are from M.L. Wilson to Paul Appleby, August 12, 1942, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-M, Box 746, Folder 7, NA.

1942. Hearing Tannenbaum's proposal of the Cárdenas tour, Messersmith was enthusiastic, but only because the U.S. Army had been planning a similar trip. Cárdenas had a year earlier been appointed the chief of the Mexican army's western division, and U.S. military leaders hoped that a Cárdenas visit to the West Coast might ease the racial tension between whites and Mexican-Americans in southern California, which resulted that same summer in the infamous "Zoot Suit" riots. Tannenbaum, however, had far greater aspirations for the trip. By his planning, Cárdenas and Tannenbaum would journey by automobile eastward across the country, stopping to see "some rural rehabilitation work carried out under the auspices of the FSA," a visit "to the TVA by all means," a stop in Raleigh, North Carolina, to visit Josephus Daniels, and lastly a long stay in Washington.⁵³ Despite Messersmith's distrust for Tannenbaum, whom he viewed as a radical, the Ambassador understood the professor's personal advantage in dealing with Cárdenas and agreed to let him play a central role in the trip's planning.⁵⁴

On his way back from Mexico to New York in early August, Tannenbaum stopped in Washington to have lunch with M.L. Wilson and finalize the trip itinerary before presenting it to Cárdenas and the U.S. State Department.⁵⁵ Within the week, Wilson prepared a memo on the visit that he forwarded on to USDA undersecretary Paul Appleby. "Some of the things Cardenas will want to see," Wilson wrote, are: "work of the Farm Security Administration," "Agricultural Extension work," "a dramatic soil conservation project or two," and a "subsistence homestead project." In short, Wilson

⁵³ Tannenbaum's ideas for a trip itinerary are from Frank Tannenbaum to Sumner Welles, July 31, 1942, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

⁵⁴ George Messersmith to Sumner Welles, July 14, 1942, RG 59, 812.001 Cardenas, Lazaro/259, Box 4113, Folder 3, NA.

⁵⁵ On the Tannenbaum-Wilson lunch in Washington, see Tannenbaum to Wilson, August 6, 1942, Series II, Box 17, FTP.

wanted to demonstrate the major accomplishments of the rural and environmental New Deal, believing that they grew from the same motivations that animated Cárdenas.⁵⁶

Certain of Wilson and the USDA's support, Tannenbaum wrote to Cárdenas to pressure him for a commitment to the trip. "At my suggestion," he told the former President, the pilgrimage would "include things you have been interested in all your life – irrigation, soil-conservation, rural rehabilitation, agricultural experiment stations and rural education."⁵⁷ While Cárdenas agreed in his response that the trip's planned destinations were "very suggestive," he told Tannenbaum that he was forced to postpone the trip indefinitely because of wartime duties in Mexico, though the itinerary "has made me more interested in realizing it one day."⁵⁸

Tannenbaum grew frustrated with Cárdenas' indecisiveness and saw his prioritization of national war aims as wrongful. "You should come, and come soon," he pleaded upon receiving news of the postponement. "This is the psychological moment... a time in the world's history and in the relations between the United States and Mexico when you have a special role of good will and good influence to perform."⁵⁹ Yet Cárdenas continued to put off the trip. In the fall of 1942, he was appointed minister of defense and thus commander of the entire Mexican military, and saw little free time to make the long U.S. tour that Tannenbaum hoped for. Despite such setbacks, Tannenbaum remained committed to the prospect of the trip, telling the skeptical State Department that Cárdenas did intend to make the visit soon. Tannenbaum even sought help from the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, a wartime agency headed by Nelson

⁵⁶ M.L. Wilson to Paul Appleby, August 12, 1942, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-M, Box 746, Folder 7, NA.

⁵⁷ Tannenbaum to Lázaro Cárdenas, August 24, 1942, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

⁵⁸ Cárdenas to Tannenbaum, August 26, 1942, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

⁵⁹ Tannenbaum to Cárdenas, September 8, 1942, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

Rockefeller that worked to ensure Latin American cooperation in the war effort, to add their momentum to realizing the visit. While the Rockefeller agency generated a long report on the benefits that the trip would reap, neither their actions nor Tannenbaum's would sway Cárdenas toward making the trip.⁶⁰ By the summer of 1944, when the political climate in each nation was decisively turning away from the reform-minded programs of the New Deal and Cardenismo, Tannenbaum lamented to the former President that the trip had never materialized. "There are so many things in the United States which Mexico needs and could learn to develop for herself," Tannenbaum wrote to Cárdenas. But with the end of the war on the horizon, he hoped that his friend could soon "travel leisurely across the United States and take back with you to Mexico those things in American agriculture and education, forestry and public service, which always so deeply interested you."⁶¹

Despite his friend's high hopes, Cárdenas would not visit the United States during his life. Cárdenas remained active in Mexican politics into the 1960s, and even became a loud critic of the U.S.'s role in the hemispheric battles of the Cold War, particularly their involvement in Guatemala and Cuba.⁶² Yet if Tannenbaum and Wilson's plans for the Cárdenas visit went unrealized, a steady stream of Mexican agronomists and agrarian bureaucrats did make their own, if less publicized, visits to the American South in the New Deal era. The last section of this chapter will examine how their pilgrimages to observe American rural rehabilitation projects, particularly those in the U.S. South,

⁶⁰ For Nelson Rockefeller's report, see "A Cárdenas Trip to the United States," April 15, 1943, RG 59, 812.001 Cardenas, Lazaro/291, Box 4113, Folder 2, NA.

⁶¹ Tannenbaum to Cárdenas, July 19, 1944, Series I, Box 1, FTP.

⁶² On Cárdenas' long career beyond the 1930s and his continuing critique of U.S. foreign policy, see especially Eric Zolov, "¡Cuba Sí, Yanquis No!: The Sacking of the Instituto Cultural México-Norteamericano in Morelia, Michoacán, 1961," in *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with Cold War Studies*, eds. Gilbert Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

would impact the Mexican state's evolving policy of agricultural development into the postwar era.

Mexican Agronomists in the New Deal South

During the summer of 1942, Eduardo Limón, Mexico's foremost maize geneticist, came to study corn breeding at the Agricultural Experiment Station of North Carolina State College in Raleigh. Limón was no stranger to the United States or its scientific establishment, as he had a few years earlier earned a master's degree at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. It was in Ames that Limón had first met Henry A. Wallace, and it was Wallace who had recommended that Limón come to the United States in 1942 for this tour of corn breeding institutions. Wallace had recommended Limón see the U.S. Corn Belt, which he did tour earlier that year, but Limón's longer stay in Raleigh came at the suggestion of another American: Josephus Daniels, Limón's acquaintance in Mexico City. While North Carolina's corn breeders were not as renowned as those of Iowa, Limón felt that "general conditions in North Carolina resemble conditions in Mexico a great deal," as he told the *Raleigh News & Observer* that summer. "Any findings of the agricultural experiment station here will be very useful to promote agriculture in Mexico." The opportunity of visiting local Farm Security Administration and Soil Conservation Service projects in rural North Carolina, too, sweetened the deal.⁶³

Limón was but one of many Mexican agronomists and agrarian bureaucrats to travel north of the border during the long 1930s. These pilgrims acknowledged that the U.S. government, and especially the New Deal USDA, had acquired a social vision for

⁶³ "Mexican Studying Agriculture Here," undated clipping from the *Raleigh News and Observer*, sent from Josephus Daniels to Marte R. Gómez, June 5, 1942, Cartas, 1942, A-F, AMRG. Limón told the newspaper that he was getting his corn breeding information "mainly from North Carolina."

reforming the countryside that meshed with their own political program. As Pedro de Alba, a Mexican working at the Pan-American Union in Washington, observed, the USDA was conducting an “essentially social and scientific task” and was “one of the departments most in sympathy with Mexico’s advances.”⁶⁴ Sensing this political shift in their northern neighbor, a host of young Mexicans in the late 1930s and early 1940s sought apprenticeships with agencies such as the Farm Security Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Soil Conservation Service. Working in Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and across the Deep South, regions where the U.S. federal government was working most aggressively in those years to overcome rural poverty and underdevelopment, the Mexican visitors sought to bring back home the best that the New Deal could offer in rural rehabilitation, agricultural credit, irrigation, flood and erosion control, and even plant breeding. Their studies and observations would decisively impact the Mexican government’s approach to reforming its countryside, even in the years after the New Deal and redistributionist Cardenista approaches fell from political favor.

Perhaps no U.S. federal agency fascinated Mexican observers more than the Tennessee Valley Authority. Chartered in May of 1933, the TVA was a government-owned corporation chartered to redirect the energy of the Tennessee River toward the human goals of irrigation, electricity generation, and industrial development. An explicitly regional and southern program, the TVA was aimed at uplifting the small farmers of the Tennessee River Valley, which encompassed most of Tennessee and large parts of Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and North Carolina. Because of its myriad purposes – ranging from fertilizer production to flood control – the TVA was

⁶⁴ Pedro d’Alba to José Parrés, December 5, 1938, RG 16, Finding Aid PI-191, Entry 17-J, Box 2789, Folder 1, NA.

more resilient to the political attacks that plagued other New Deal rural planning programs, and was commonly hailed as one of FDR's greatest successes, though scholars have since then pointed to its many shortcomings.⁶⁵ Yet most importantly, of all the New Deal agencies, none were as actively internationalist as the TVA, particularly in the later years of the New Deal. The global expansionism of the TVA was due in large part to its evangelical chief, David Lilienthal, who was deeply committed to promoting his agency as a global panacea to rural poverty. The region affected by TVA might be "one valley," but its example could be carried to "a thousand others," Lilienthal famously boasted.⁶⁶

It was Lilienthal who in the summer of 1941 initiated contact between the TVA and the Mexican government. That July, hoping to perk hemispheric interest in New Deal development programs, Lilienthal invited thirty-two diplomats from across Latin America to spend a week touring the TVA works near Nashville, Chattanooga, and Knoxville, Tennessee. First on the list of invitations was Francisco Castillo Nájera, the Mexican ambassador to the U.S., as well as several members of the embassy staff – including Gonzalo Blanco Macías, the embassy's agricultural attaché and former National Bank of Ejidal Credit official who a few years earlier had actually presented at

⁶⁵ On the successes and failures of the TVA, see Michael McDonald, *TVA and the Dispossessed: The Resettlement of Population in the Norris Dam Area* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), Nancy Grant, *TVA and Black Americans: Planning for the Status Quo* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), and parts of Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ David Lilienthal, *TVA: Democracy on the March* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 2. On Lilienthal and the TVA's global aspirations, see especially David Ekbladh, "'Mr. TVA': Grass-Roots Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol of U.S. Overseas Development," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 3 (2002), and Steven M. Neuse, *David E. Lilienthal: The Journey of an American Liberal* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), along with Ekbladh's recent monograph *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Clarence Senior's Laguna conference.⁶⁷ Castillo Nájera and his colleagues gladly accepted, and on July 13 journeyed from Washington to Tennessee. Over the course of several days the Latin American delegates, accompanied by TVA officials, saw thirteen dams, toured irrigation projects and small farms, and met with both Tennessee's governor and senators. Each guest was given a detailed booklet on the agency's mission, titled "The Widening of Economic Opportunity Through TVA," which explained how the "cotton lands of the South" had "paid the price" of America's industrial expansion, and that the New Deal sought to overcome the bankruptcy of both soil and people. The Mexican delegates were awed by both the size and scale of the works, and at the lofty promises made by its creators.⁶⁸

On the last day of the tour, Lilienthal himself presided over a banquet dinner overlooking Cherokee Dam in eastern Tennessee, where he spoke to the delegates about the global significance of the TVA. Among the Mexican participants, none were more fascinated than Justo Sierra, a young secretary employed by the embassy. In the American South's struggle against poverty, he saw a parable of Mexico's recent history. After Lilienthal was finished speaking, Sierra approached him personally to introduce himself and to suggest a cooperative project between the TVA and the Mexican Secretariat of Agriculture and Development. Could the TVA, wondered Sierra, consider hosting a number of Mexican agronomy students in Tennessee for a few weeks, to learn from the project and bring that knowledge back to Mexico? Lilienthal, ever the

⁶⁷ For Lilienthal's invitation, see Francisco Castillo Nájera to Cordell Hull, July 8, 1941, Clasificación Topográfica III-146-1, AHSRE. On Blanco Macías's participation in the Laguna, see Clarence Senior to Will Alexander, May 15, 1940, RG 96, Finding Aid PI-118, Entry 2, Box 38, AD-070 Mexico, NA.

⁶⁸ For the details and itinerary of the trip, along with a copy of the pamphlet that participants received, see Francisco Castillo Nájera to Ezequiel Padilla, July 22, 1941, Clasificación Topográfica III-601-24, AHSRE.

evangelical, was highly enthusiastic about the proposition. But a few weeks would not do, Lilienthal suggested – several months would be required. Lilienthal even promised Sierra that the U.S. government could likely pay for the students when they were in residence.⁶⁹

Shared enthusiasm for the collaborative project quickened diplomatic negotiations. On August 7, Sierra and Blanco Macías sat down with Lilienthal in Washington to iron out the details of the apprenticeship. With funding from Nelson Rockefeller’s Office of Inter-American Affairs, Lilienthal offered to pay for six young, English-speaking agronomists to stay in residence at the TVA in Knoxville for six months. They would receive \$5 a day, to support them while studying the ins and outs of the works.⁷⁰ The decision of which technicians to send lay in the hands of agriculture Secretary Marte Gómez, who chose five agricultural engineers that he was grooming for employment in the National Irrigation Commission: Gabriel Oropeza Mendoza, Víctor Hardy, Manuel Navarro Novelo, Ignacio Alcocer, and José Yépez.⁷¹ In a touch of nepotism, the last spot was reserved for Gómez’s nephew, Salvador Mérito.⁷²

By the early summer of 1942, the six young Mexicans arrived in Tennessee to begin their apprenticeship. In Knoxville, they occupied a tenuous position between white and black, and were likely some of the TVA’s only non-white employees, as the agency was known for their racial discrimination. Nevertheless, by all accounts the six men had a fruitful stay in Knoxville, eagerly observing the TVA’s marriage of high-modernist

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ On the Washington meeting, see Francisco Castillo Nájera to Ezequiel Padilla, August 8, 1941, Clasificación Topográfica III-601-24, AHSRE.

⁷¹ Alfonso González Gallardo to Ezequiel Padilla, October 24, 1941, Clasificación Topográfica III-601-24, AHSRE.

⁷² Salvador Mérito to Marte R. Gómez, June 23, 1942, Cartas, 1942, L-M, AMRG.

technology and social welfare politics. Like so many other Mexican observers of state planning projects both American and Soviet, they grew seduced by the ideology that the reordering of nature for mankind's benefit was the highest human calling. By November of 1942, they returned to Mexico City for assignment from the National Irrigation Commission, which dispatched them across rural Mexico to put their learning into action. The visit was "judged very useful," declared Adolfo Orive Alba of the National Irrigation Commission upon the agronomists' return, as "the training obtained by our personnel will obtain profitable results in the utilization of their experience with this technical matter."⁷³

Hearing from his nephew Salvador about the visit and TVA's relevance to Mexican rural planning, agriculture secretary Marte Gómez yearned to make his own pilgrimage to the Tennessee Valley. To the U.S. embassy in Mexico City, he confessed that he was "deeply interested in visiting [the] Works [to] see what we can learn from them for the development of the Mexican irrigation systems and our agricultural regions."⁷⁴ When David Lilienthal came to Mexico in December of 1945, where he spent several days with Gómez touring Mexican irrigation projects around the capital, Lilienthal's continued insistence that Gómez make the trip finally tipped the scales. In mid-April of 1946, Gómez flew to Knoxville and took a tour of the TVA works similar to that taken by Castillo Nájera and Blanco Macías four years earlier, though the left-leaning rhetoric among the Americans was likely dampened by those years. In front of a banquet crowd in Knoxville, a humbled Gómez attested that "to visit the Tennessee works is to deal with one of the most promising fulfillments of our time." "Everywhere in the world there are poor farmers," Gómez admitted, and "all of us must help him if we do

⁷³ Adolfo Orive Alba to Ezequiel Padilla, December 23, 1942, Clasificación Topográfica III-601-24, AHSRE.

⁷⁴ Gómez to Herbert Bursley, May 28, 1945, Cartas, 1945, A-Ch, AMRG.

not want that within the frontiers of each country there be depression and public malaise, revolution maybe.” In his eyes, the Tennessee Valley Authority had most successfully addressed these tensions, and he promised that Mexico would shortly follow its example.⁷⁵

As was clear from Gómez’s words, the social rhetoric of Cardenismo was in retreat by 1946. A Mexican TVA, in Gómez’s formulation, would not be a revolutionary dam – it would *prevent* further revolution in the countryside. Indeed, as the Mexican state turned rightward in the late 1940s, especially under President Miguel Alemán (to be explored in much greater detail in Chapter Six), technocratic development schemes such as a Mexican TVA, bled dry of its social-leveling rhetoric, would overshadow the overtly redistributionist politics of the radical 1930s. Gómez was certainly not the last to look to Tennessee: in the later years of the 1940s, Alemán commissioned numerous studies of the TVA and attempted to implement its lessons in various parts of the republic, most famously in the Papaloapan River Valley of southern Mexico. Those projects, however, were far more oriented toward industrial development than the vision of small-scale, contented farmers that the TVA had promoted in the New Deal years.⁷⁶

While of central importance, the TVA was only one of many New Deal agencies that Mexican agronomists looked to for cues and suggestions. The Soil Conservation Service (SCS), chartered in 1935, sought to make the war upon soil erosion a central part of the New Deal. Over the course of the 1930s, and into the postwar era, the SCS

⁷⁵ Gómez’s trip itinerary is in “Visit of the Honorable Marte R. Gomez, Minister of Agriculture of Mexico, and Party,” April 17, 1946, Secretaría de Agricultura – 1946, AMRG. The Knoxville speech, given in English, is found in “Discurso con motivo de la visita a las obras de la T.V.A.,” April 1946, Secretaría de Agricultura – 1946, AMRG.

⁷⁶ For one particularly influential study, see Hugo Rangel Couto, *El sistema del Valle del Tennessee* (Mexico City: Government Printers, 1946), see also Diana Schwartz’s forthcoming University of Chicago dissertation on damming and relocation in the Papaloapan River Valley.

pioneered reforestation campaigns and the retirement of worn-out lands, as well as the introduction of cover crops to prevent the ongoing loss of plowed topsoil due to rains and wind. Just as was true for the TVA, the director of the SCS, North Carolinian Hugh H. Bennett, was a committed internationalist as well with a particular interest in Latin America.⁷⁷ In the fall of 1942, a group of five Mexican agronomists led by Gonzalo Andrade Alcocer apprenticed for the SCS in a similar way that their colleagues were doing in Tennessee. Spending most of their time in the American Southwest, they nevertheless took a number of trips into the Southeast, including one to Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee, where they toured TVA and SCS sites and even got a chance to meet Hugh Bennett himself and then-Vice President Henry A. Wallace. Returning to Mexico in early 1943, Andrade Alcocer and his colleagues were quickly



Figure 3.2. Gonzalo Andrade Alcocer and colleagues at a Soil Conservation Service field site, 1943. They were but one of the many Mexican agronomists to visit U.S. rural rehabilitation programs during the late 1930s and early 1940s. (Asuntos Oficiales – 1943, Archivo Marte R. Gómez)

⁷⁷ On Bennett and the SCS, see particularly Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, and Paul Sutter, “What Gullies Mean: Georgia's 'Little Grand Canyon' and Southern Environmental History,” *Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 3 (2010).

enlisted into the newly created Commission for Soil Conservation within the National Irrigation Commission, and carried the SCS vision to the Mexican countryside.⁷⁸

Perhaps no individual, however, better illustrates the liberal internationalism of interwar Mexican agronomy than Ramón Fernández y Fernández. Born to a middling family in the northern state of Zacatecas in 1906, Fernández moved to Mexico City and earned his *ingeniero agrónomo* degree at the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo in 1928. At Chapingo, he grew deeply politicized in his understanding of Mexico's rural problems, and like many of his generation, sought to marry his technical training to the Revolution's social agenda. By 1932, he was teaching courses in agricultural economics at that same school with a distinctive political bent.⁷⁹ Yet during the Cárdenas years, Fernández also followed the U.S. government's simultaneous attempt to remake its countryside, collecting USDA publications on topics such as changing land tenure and rural resettlement.⁸⁰

In 1938, Fernández sought to add his voice to the agrarian conversation that was then reaching a crescendo in the United States, and applied to give a paper at the Fifth International Conference of Agricultural Economists, hosted that August at Macdonald College in Montreal, Canada. His paper – an examination of Mexican land reform since the Revolution – was accepted, and Fernández traveled through the United States, for the first time, to attend the conference. At Macdonald, Fernández must have felt somewhat out of place, as he was the only participant not arriving from the United States, Canada,

⁷⁸ Details on the SCS apprenticeships are from Gonzalo Andrade Alcocer to Marte R. Gómez, January 1, 1943, Asuntos Oficiales, 1943, AMRG.

⁷⁹ Biographical details on Fernández are from Leobardo Jiménez Sánchez, *Las Ciencias Agrícolas y sus Protagonistas, Volumen I* (Chapingo: Colegio de Postgraduados de la Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo, 1984), 142-143.

⁸⁰ See, for example, United States Department of Agriculture, "A Graphic Summary of Farm Tenure," December 1936, Archivo Ramón Fernández y Fernández, Box 3, Biblioteca Luis González, Colegio de Michoacán, Zamora, Michoacán (hereafter ARFF).

or Europe. Nevertheless, Fernández grew fascinated with the nascent social vision of the agrarian New Deal, whose leadership was well-represented at the Montreal meeting.

Over the week, he rubbed shoulders with M.L. Wilson, Mordecai Ezekiel, Carl Taylor of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and even Secretary of Agriculture Henry A.

Wallace, who addressed the conference on its final day.⁸¹ When Fernández gave his presentation, titled “The Mexican Agrarian Reform,” he felt that his English was too halting to read the paper, and had a friend from Iowa State deliver the address. Through his interpreter, Fernández told the crowd of how “the concentration of territorial property in the hands of a few has constituted a fundamental social problem” in Mexico, and that Cardenismo sought “the solution of the agrarian problem in order to satisfy the popular impulses.” Whether Wallace, Wilson, or their cohort were in the audience is impossible to tell, but the possibility certainly teases the imagination.⁸²

Four years later, Fernández would shift from distant observation of the rural New Deal to direct participation, when he was selected by the Mexican embassy in Washington to be the recipient of a year-long fellowship sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE). In the summer of 1942, Fernández traveled to Washington to begin his apprenticeship with the BAE. In the coming months, though, Fernández would grow frustrated with the bookishness of social scientists who rarely left the USDA building in Washington; he desired instead to see how their programs were actually playing out in the countryside. Soon enough, he transferred to the Farm Security Administration to study “credit problems more nearly related to those in his own country,” as the U.S. Embassy noted. By late 1942, Fernández began a months-long tour

⁸¹ Itinerary is in “Fifth International Conference of Agricultural Economists,” August 21-28, 1938, Box 153, ARFF.

⁸² Ramón Fernández y Fernández, “The Mexican Agrarian Reform,” August 1938, Box 166, ARFF.

of the U.S. South. In Greene County, Georgia, he witnessed the attempts of Arthur Raper and fellow rural sociologists to overcome the social stratification of a former plantation district. In Mississippi, he visited cooperative farm communities in the Delta region. And in Arkansas, where he stayed longest, he worked closely with Farm Security Administration officials in rural credit. As the FSA weathered its most vicious attacks in late 1942 and early 1943, Fernández clipped articles from Arkansas newspapers that both praised and damned the bureau as it approached its institutional death.⁸³

While the FSA did not survive the political attacks of 1943, Fernández bore his memories of it and its strategies back to Mexico. Returning to teaching at Chapingo, he commissioned his students to do reports on U.S. programs in soil conservation and agricultural credit.⁸⁴ And to the Mexican agricultural leadership, he argued passionately for attention to U.S. models for rural rehabilitation. Describing his fellowship in early 1945 to his former teacher at Chapingo and then the Secretary of Agriculture Marte R. Gómez, Fernández confessed that he sympathized deeply with the “revolutionary faith” of the Farm Security Administration’s directors. Having seen the “results of their work[,]

my sympathy was transformed into enthusiasm,” and he wrote to Gómez of his “natural impulse to try to push a campaign to create our own Farm Security.”⁸⁵ What impact such pressure had is difficult to tell. Gómez was not in office for much longer, and his

⁸³ Details on Fernández’s fellowship and “credit problems” quote are from George Messersmith to Ezequiel Padilla, July 13, 1943, Clasificación Topográfica III-2459-3, AHSRE; some of the FSA materials in Fernández’s personal papers at the Colegio de Michoacán are “Supervisor’s Guidebook To Aid in Planning, Organizing, and Directing the County FSA Program,” Box 88, “Greene County, Georgia: The Story of One Southern County,” Box 88, “By-laws of Mileston Community, Inc., Tchula, Holmes County, Mississippi,” Box 52, ARFF. Some sample news clippings are “Communal Farms Long Discredited,” *Arkansas Democrat*, April 7, 1943, Box 51, and “FSA System Condemned,” *Arkansas Democrat*, April 15, 1943, Box 153, ARFF.

⁸⁴ Some examples of student reports are Enrique Valdivia Muñoz, “¿Tiene importancia el crédito agrícola en la conservación de los suelos?” 1944, Box 8, and Armando Huacuja, “Cooperativismo y cooperativas en los Estados Unidos,” undated, Box 52, ARFF.

⁸⁵ Ramón Fernández y Fernández to Marte R. Gómez, March 6, 1945, Cartas, 1945, D-G, AMRG.

successors de-emphasized federal extension of rural credit, and certainly land redistribution, in favor of increasing productivity for larger farmers. Fernández himself left Mexico by the late 1940s, moving to Venezuela where he would work in cooperation with Nelson Rockefeller's Venezuelan Basic Economy Corporation. The U.S.-Latin American dialogue, by those years, was beginning to take a very different tone, and the flow of political influence was becoming far more unidirectional.

During the long 1930s, from roughly 1933 to 1945, U.S. and Mexican agrarian reformers both in and outside of government looked beyond their respective borders and conceived of their struggle against rural inequality in transnational terms. The myriad comparisons that they made between the political economy of the American South and the plantation zones of Mexico had a transformative effect on both movements for rural justice. In the United States, with the election of Franklin Roosevelt, a cadre of agrarian liberals entered the USDA and struggled to reverse that Department's former emphasis on aiding wealthier, commercial farmers. In looking for inspirations abroad, they turned to the rhetoric and action of Mexican revolutionary *agrarismo*, which after 1934 was undergoing a renaissance of its own. The New Deal's engagement with the Mexican Revolution played a decisive role in its radicalization. As the most prominent example, the Farm Security Administration, universally considered the most aggressive liberal agency of the rural New Deal, was born from the juxtaposition of the U.S. South and revolutionary Mexico. Additionally, a score of influential rural leaders, including Rexford Tugwell, M.L. Wilson, and Norman Littell, visited Mexico at the height of that nation's agrarian program, observing its progress and gauging it by New Deal standards.

Outside of Washington, the transnational advocacy of non-state actors such as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union or Frank Tannenbaum likewise relied upon Mexican examples to push the boundaries of the American political spectrum.

Among Mexicans too, their gaze to the north would have a decisive impact on rural development campaigns during the same era. In exploiting the agrarian sympathies of liberal U.S. policymakers, most effectively U.S. Ambassador and North Carolinian Josephus Daniels, Lázaro Cárdenas and his Partido Nacional Revolucionario demonstrated their diplomatic skill and sensitivity to U.S. regionalism and that nation's turbulent political climate. The rural New Deal also served as a Mexican reference point, as the Secretariat of Agriculture and Development sent dozens of Mexican agronomists to observe the achievements of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Farm Security Administration, and Soil Conservation Service. It was through their allegiances and mutual understanding with U.S. agrarian liberals during the 1930s that the Mexican revolutionary state grew comfortable with American technical interventions, even before the postwar Mexican political establishment began to cultivate closer ties with the United States.

The survival and extension of the U.S.-Mexican agrarian dialogue into the 1940s also forces us to rethink the traditional periodization of the reform movements of the 1930s. In both Mexican and U.S. historiography, the hinge between the 1930s and 1940s has long been viewed as a major political turning point. Among students of Mexican politics, the transfer of power from Lázaro Cárdenas to Manuel Avila Camacho in 1940 is frequently understood to represent a dramatic about-face in Mexican politics, as the ruling party supposedly abandoned the agrarian project and devoted itself to reckless

industrialization. Likewise, U.S. historians point to Franklin Roosevelt's declaration that "Dr. Win-the-War" must take the place of "Dr. New Deal," which supposedly marked the death of socially reformist New Dealism. In reality, in both nations the political transformations of the 1940s were slow and negotiated, moving in unpredictable directions. Neither Avila Camacho nor "Dr. Win-the-War" could dramatically reverse the political momentum of the earlier era, and indeed some of the most lasting accomplishments of U.S. and Mexican social politics would occur in the 1940s.

That the U.S.-Mexican dialogue on rural reform lasted less than a decade may be proof to some that it was an ephemeral moment, a lost window of opportunity that was later eroded by growing conservatism in both nations. Yet because of its timing, at the dawn of the United States' expansion into the nascent "Third World," the conversation between the Mexican and American agrarians would have echoes across the planet in the postwar decades. Even before the 1930s, the U.S. had fostered a special relationship with Mexico, where the latter nation served as a laboratory for American foreign relations elsewhere across the globe. In acknowledging the legitimacy of the Mexican Revolution as a justified social movement and thereby recognizing that colonial systems of wealth distribution were as great a danger to global stability as left-wing revolution, many U.S. diplomats turned a corner from the days of "Dollar Diplomacy" and its protection of unrestrained capital accumulation. Policymakers would bear these Mexican lessons of the 1930s into the early Cold War.

The New Dealers themselves, though they were increasingly marginalized in American politics by the early 1940s, also looked beyond the United States and Mexico in the postwar decades as they fanned out across the planet as members of institutions

such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the U.S. Agency for International Development. While the rural New Deal's most socially conscious and redistributive agrarian programs perished at home in the wake of World War II and the Red Scare, they lived on abroad. As will be explored in the following chapter, even within the Rockefeller Foundation, as they planned their Mexican agricultural project in 1941 and 1942, program leaders frequently suggested the Farm Security Administration as a potential model for structuring Mexican reforms.

To understand the context of the Rockefeller Foundation's program of agricultural assistance in Mexico that began in 1943, we must recognize how the political struggles of the 1930s, as of then unresolved, shaped the formulation of that project. Just as much as their earlier agricultural work in the U.S. South, questions over land redistribution, the *ejido*, and rural inequality loomed large in the collective imagination of the Rockefeller Foundation at the dawn of a new age of development.

CHAPTER 4

READING THE SOUTH SOUTHWARD: ROCKEFELLER RURAL DEVELOPMENT FROM THE U.S. COTTON BELT TO MEXICO, 1935-1943

During the interwar years, the politics of agrarian comparison between the United States and Mexico wrought dramatic effects. Reform-minded bureaucrats within both the Plan Sexenal and the New Deal looked beyond their national borders for inspiration in modernizing rural regions they believed suffered from common ills. Grassroots organizers beyond the walls of government sought transnational alliances with their counterparts in agricultural labor and social planning. Scientists, politicians, and revolutionaries – or combinations thereof – exchanged dam blueprints, credit schemes, land reform legislation, and seeds. But of the many consequences of the U.S.-Mexican agrarian dialogue during the long 1930s, none were more lasting or influential than the decision of the Rockefeller philanthropies to transplant their experiences with U.S. regional development onto Mexico. That transition began in 1935 with an internal push to extend U.S. southern lessons south of the border, gained significant traction in 1941, and was finally accomplished in 1943 with the creation of the cooperative Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP). This chapter will examine the institutional history and dynamics that enabled that transplantation, and how the U.S. southern roots of the Green Revolution gave rise to a project far more complex and contradictory than most scholars have previously imagined.

When Rockefeller Foundation planners contemplated an intervention into Mexican agriculture between 1935 and 1943, they looked to a number of precedents in how to remake rural life and its agricultural base. First, they acknowledged the Mexican Revolution's attempt to alter patterns of land tenure and production, particularly through Lázaro Cárdenas' emphasis on the *ejido* as the building block for a new Mexican agriculture. Yet the philanthropies also had a deep well of U.S. experience that they drew upon in imagining what a program in agricultural uplift would look like. Of obvious importance were Seaman Knapp and the General Education Board's demonstration campaigns in the American South, which would trigger the initial impulse toward expanding into Mexico. But the distant memory of the philanthropies' first exercise in rural reform was hazy and shrouded in myth, itself insufficient for structuring a future program. Of equal importance were more recent campaigns that targeted U.S. southern rural underdevelopment during the late 1930s. The New Deal's diagnosis of regional poverty as the nation's "number one" economic problem, along with its myriad solutions, was a ubiquitous point of reference among Rockefeller planners when they began seriously considering a Mexican program in 1941. The General Education Board too rededicated itself to regional rural concerns in the mid-1930s, and the leaders of that effort would contribute to charting the Foundation's course from the Cotton Belt toward Mexico. Therefore, by 1943, this discordant array of inspirations and influences were all on the table as Rockefeller planners looked to Mexico, yet offered them little coherence as to their future program. At its dawn, the Green Revolution grew not from any one ideology, but from the historical and regional context of the Caribbean basin and the contingency of actors operating within that world.

I am by no means the first scholar to have been drawn to the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican Agricultural Program with the hopes of explaining what motivated American policymakers and scientists as they attempted to reshape agricultural practices across the globe. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the Green Revolution first came under vociferous attack for its social and environmental shortcomings, the MAP attracted the attention of scholars who sought to document the origins of the agricultural development model that was then being employed globally. These first accounts, however, granted the MAP little complexity, reading the Cold War motivations of the late 1960s backward into an era when they did not exist. This early literature also granted Mexican actors little credit for shaping the outcome of the program.¹ By the 1990s, scholars in environmental history along with historians of Mexico reconsidered the Rockefeller program, revealing that it was a far more conflicted affair that was equally the product of Mexican policymaking.² In the last few years, the early Green Revolution has continued to attract attention, and several recent studies reveal that rather than being a neutral deterministic force, agricultural technologies were a political and cultural product. These works have

¹ See, for example, Harry M. Cleaver, "The Origins of the Green Revolution," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1975), Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara, *Modernizing Mexican Agriculture: Socioeconomic Implications of Technological Change, 1940 - 1970* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1976), Stephen Lewontin, "The Green Revolution and the Politics of Agricultural Development in Mexico since 1940," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1983), Anneliese Markus de Kennedy, "The Office of Special Studies: A Study of the Joint Mexican Secretariat of Agriculture - Rockefeller Foundation Program in Agriculture, 1943-1963," (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1973), and Eduardo L. Venezian and William K. Gamble, *The Agricultural Development of Mexico: Its Structure and Growth since 1950* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

² See works such as Joseph Cotter, *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880 - 2002* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), Deborah Fitzgerald, "Exporting American Agriculture: The Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico, 1943 - 1953," *Social Studies of Science* 16, no. 3 (1986), Fernando Ortoll, "Orígenes de un proyecto agrícola: la Fundación Rockefeller y la Revolución Verde," *Sociedades Rurales, Producción y Medio Ambiente* 4, no. 1 (2003), Adolfo Olea-Franco, "One Century of Higher Agricultural Education and Research in Mexico (1850s-1960s), with a Preliminary Survey on the Same Subjects in the United States," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2001), John H. Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), David A. Sonnenfeld, "Mexico's "Green Revolution," 1940 - 1980: Towards an Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 16, no. 4 (1992), and Angus Wright, *The Death of Ramón González: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

also debunked the previously accepted idea that “development” was a fully formed, coherent ideology by the end of World War II.³

Yet despite the increasing complexity that scholars have come to grant the Rockefeller Foundation’s most renowned project in agricultural reform, almost none have acknowledged the essential role played by the philanthropies’ prior experience in grappling with questions of rural poverty in the American South.⁴ Much of this is due to a worn origins myth that credits U.S. Vice President and corn breeder Henry A. Wallace with the initial push behind the Foundation’s involvement in agriculture. As I argue below, Wallace’s involvement was essential not in his formulation of strategy, but in that he lent vocal support to an earlier internal Foundation effort to apply U.S. southern models to Mexico. Wallace’s much-touted involvement has thus skewed our understanding of U.S. regionalism in shaping the early Green Revolution. Believing that Wallace, an Iowan, was the key architect behind the Foundation’s planned program in Mexican agriculture, the geographer Carl Sauer famously warned in 1941 that “the example of Iowa is about the most dangerous of all for Mexico.” Sauer’s criticism has been retold in countless histories, implying that Foundation planners made their biggest

³ The most influential recent works are Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) and his earlier article “Miracles of Modernization: The Green Revolution and the Apotheosis of Technology,” *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 2 (2004), along with David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), David Kinkela, *DDT and the American Century: Global Health, Environmental Politics, and the Pesticide That Changed the World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), especially Chapter Three, and Jonathan Harwood, “Peasant Friendly Plant Breeding and the Early Years of the Green Revolution in Mexico,” *Agricultural History* 83, no. 3 (2009).

⁴ The only exception, and a highly problematic one, would be Harry Cleaver’s unpublished 1975 dissertation “The Origins of the Green Revolution,” which argued that the agricultural work of the General Education Board was a predecessor to the Green Revolution. It was, however, largely based on conjecture rather than archival research, and Cleaver does not analyze the negotiations that led from the GEB to the MAP, nor the workings of the Mexican program itself. A number of other works briefly mention that southern figures were crucial to proposing the Mexican program, but do not delve into their importance in shaping the program; see Markus de Kennedy, “The Office of Special Studies” and Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution*.

mistake in attempting to transplant an idealized and incompatible Midwest upon Mexico.⁵

But what does it mean if the cotton South, a region that like much of Mexico struggled with divisions of class, race, and the legacy of the plantation system of agriculture, served as the Foundation's initial model for rural uplift rather than the Midwest?

"Americanization" campaigns abroad relied not on *one* but *many* Americas.⁶ This chapter argues that the Foundation's more appropriate equation of Mexican problems with U.S. southern ones ensured that the early years of the Mexican Agricultural Program were surprisingly sensitive to the social and economic questions that the Green Revolution is commonly faulted for ignoring.

Despite the historiographical weight attached to New Dealer Henry Wallace's participation in the early Green Revolution, it is only recently that historians have begun to pay attention to the links between the radical 1930s and the postwar age of development.⁷ Between 1941 and 1943, as the Rockefeller Foundation weighed various models in planning their Mexican program, the New Deal's attack on U.S. rural poverty continued despite political opposition, and much of it was aimed at the South. In Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas had just completed a presidential term during which he had redistributed nearly fifty million acres of land to smallholders. Those programs, in addition to the

⁵ For two examples, see Wright, *The Death of Ramón González* and Cullather, *The Hungry World*.

⁶ This may seem an obvious conclusion, but the vast majority of scholarly literature on "Americanization" does not take into account the importance of U.S. regional variation. For a prominent work that has neglected such perspectives, see Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁷ Nick Cullather's *The Hungry World*, David Ekbladh's *The Great American Mission*, and Elizabeth Borgwardt's *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005) are the best published monographs linking New Deal ideas of development with those practiced in the nascent Third World, though it is not a focus of Cullather's book, and Ekbladh relies primarily on the Tennessee Valley Authority as the predominant U.S. model for rural development. Borgwardt emphasizes the intellectual framework of international institutions such as the United Nations, rather than grappling with the nascent "development" project. Forthcoming works from Daniel Immerwahr and Clifford Kuhn will further contribute to this vein. Kristin Ahlberg's *Transplanting the Great Society: Lyndon Johnson and Food for Peace* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008) follows a similar vein but for Lyndon Johnson's Great Society project, itself a spin-off from the New Deal.

philanthropies' own earlier work in rural reform, would be of profound importance. In their understanding of rural Mexico, they particularly singled out the Farm Security Administration as the most applicable New Deal model. Considering the previous two chapters' illustration of how that program was originally constructed in dialogue with Mexico, the Foundation's re-importation of the FSA into Mexico is especially ironic.

When the RF presented their plan for a cooperative agricultural program to the Mexican government in 1943, that proposal was almost entirely the product of internal Foundation deliberation. Because of that, this chapter will focus almost exclusively on the intra-institutional debates within the Rockefeller philanthropies that gave birth to MAP. This is not meant to exclude the voices of Mexican planners of various political stripes in the shaping of the early Green Revolution. Once the MAP was established on Mexican soil, its control left the hands of American foundation planners and entered the turbulent world of post-Cardenista politics, to be immediately reshaped by contentious debates over the *ejido*, technology, and U.S. intervention. Chapter Five will more fully explore how negotiation between Americans and Mexicans would impact the program's goals and strategies, and ultimately give shape to the global Green Revolution model.

Examining the Rockefeller philanthropies' circuitous path from the legacy of Seaman Knapp to the New Deal and then to Mexico, this chapter argues that the Foundation's engagement with questions of regional poverty in the U.S. South was of decisive importance in giving shape to the Mexican Agricultural Program. I begin by summarizing the career of the Rockefeller philanthropies in the years after Seaman Knapp's farm demonstration program, when they withdrew from agricultural work but engineered a vast global initiative in public health and education. I then examine how two

North Carolinian veterans of the Knapp campaigns looked back to their memories of that era in pressuring Foundation leaders to pursue a similar program in 1930s Mexico. While they initially encountered little success in doing so, two factors shifted the historical tide in their favor. First, the General Education Board and Rockefeller Foundation returned their gaze to the American South in the latter half of the 1930s, bringing U.S. regional poverty once again to the forefront of philanthropy leaders' thinking. Secondly, a visit to Mexico by one of the New Deal's most prominent champions lent an influential voice to the earlier push to transplant southern models in Mexico. Lastly, I examine how these inspirations forged the program that was presented to the Mexican government in February 1943.

The Rockefeller Philanthropies since 1914

After investing millions of dollars and nearly a decade into Seaman Knapp's federal campaign to remake southern agriculture, the General Education Board was greeted not with gratitude but rebuke. Publicly excoriated for a perceived attempt to force its agenda upon the government, the GEB was in 1914 forcibly barred from federal cooperation in the future. To many in the organization, this outcome stung like an insult. Deeply felt resentment at the Smith-Lever catastrophe permeated the GEB and forced a turn away from ambitious campaigns of social engineering. By the late 1910s, the philanthropy had retreated from direct interventions in southern society and economy, including agriculture, choosing instead to fund institutions of higher education and educational research. As southern colleges and universities in those years were aloof and

often detached from the gritty reality of the region's rural poor, the GEB's spending in this realm accomplished decidedly little for the rural majority.

Acknowledging this, the philanthropy's leaders by the 1920s began expanding beyond the strict regional focus that had defined the GEB since its founding. The aging evangelical directors of the organization who had dedicated themselves to southern uplift and African-American education, such as Frederick Gates and Wallace Buttrick, had by then retired and were replaced by a new generation of professionals who were far less likely to come from the clergy, and did not have the personal connections to the Rockefeller family that defined the founding generation. These new leaders were influenced more by Progressive-era rationality and science than the Gilded Age elite's sense of *noblesse oblige*. In different hands, GEB money soon found its way to New Jersey, California, and other emerging centers of research science. In an era when American medicine and the natural and physical sciences were undergoing a renaissance, the GEB's new leaders channeled the philanthropy's resources away from regional social welfare campaigns and toward funding the work of scientists such as Alexander Fleming and Albert Einstein.⁸

If the GEB's political troubles in 1914 forced a withdrawal from agricultural reform, the memory of the Knapp campaigns in the cotton South nevertheless permeated other branches of the expanding Rockefeller philanthropies. The International Education Board, founded in 1923 as an autonomous institution that served essentially as the global

⁸ On the post-Knapp career of the GEB, see Gerald Jonas, *The Circuit Riders: Rockefeller Money and Rise of Modern Science* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), Robert Kohler, *Partners in Science: Foundations and Natural Scientists, 1900-1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), or for two institutional accounts, see Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), and "GEB Programs, 1902-1947," 1947, General Education Board papers (hereafter GEBP), Series 1.2, Box 331, Folder 3491, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York (hereafter RAC).

wing of the GEB, remained committed to the value of farm demonstrations as a strategy of agricultural improvement. In the mid-1920s, they sent Albert R. Mann, the dean of Cornell University's school of agriculture, across the Atlantic Ocean for two years to exchange rural improvement strategies with agricultural reformers in Germany, Scandinavia and central Europe. And the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), founded in 1913 as the largest and most ambitious of the family's philanthropies, would likewise manifest a continued interest in agriculture. In the early 1930s, the RF commissioned its Vice

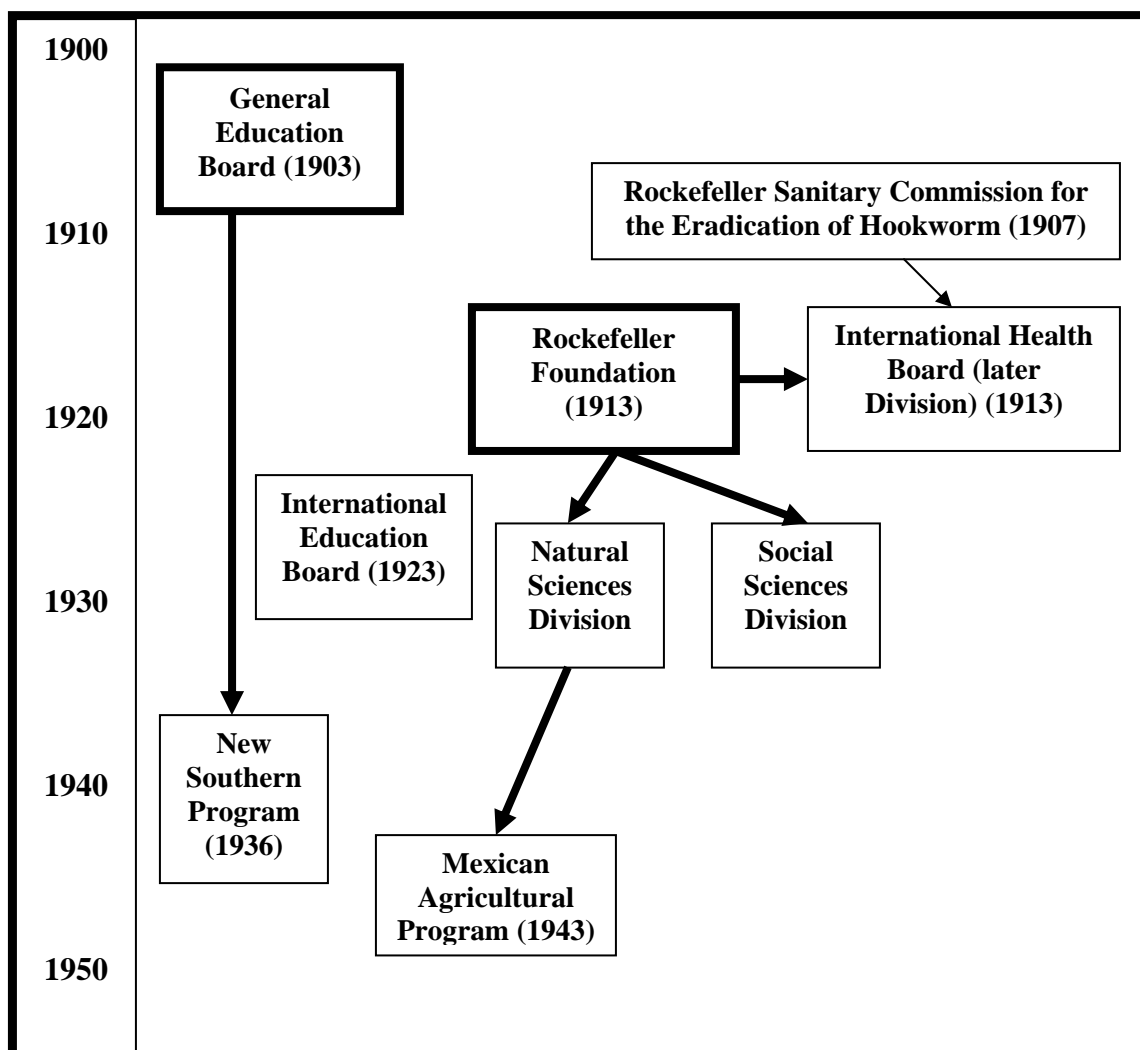


Figure 4.1. The structure of the Rockefeller philanthropies and the chronology of their establishment. Bold-face arrows represent hierarchical relationships (i.e., the Natural Sciences Division was a dependent division of the Rockefeller Foundation). Non-bold-face arrows represent evolution (i.e. the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission was dissolved to form the International Health Board).

President Selskar M. Gunn to an agricultural project in nationalist China. Over the course of several years, Gunn allied with Chinese reformers in the Mass Education Movement who sought to indoctrinate the isolated population of the countryside with the goals of urban nation-builders. Through demonstrations, Gunn taught Chinese farmers the values of basic pest management, fertilization, and crop rotations. Yet the farmers who served as his students scorned Gunn's program, far more interested in stability and security than commercial profits. As the rural conflict between Chinese Communists and the Nationalists escalated during the mid- and late 1930s, Gunn and his allies fled the country, his program an admitted failure.⁹

If agriculture was one field in which the Rockefeller philanthropies' U.S. southern experience provided a stepping-stone toward global expansion, their public health program would quickly eclipse the importance of farm demonstrations. In 1909 John D. Rockefeller, Sr., gave one million dollars to found the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission for the Eradication of Hookworm Disease. Working alongside Knapp's demonstration agents, the public health soldiers of the Sanitary Commission built latrines, sought to purify local water sources, and treated infected children and adults. Much more so than the agricultural campaign, the hookworm project could boast of demonstrable results within a few years. The achievements of the hookworm campaign fueled public interest, and in turn more funding from the Rockefeller family. When the Foundation was

⁹ The GEB, RF, and IEB, while they were all nominally independent of each other, shared directors and board members and often worked in unison. On Mann's work in Europe and its importance, see Harwood, "Peasant Friendly Plant Breeding and the Early Years of the Green Revolution," and George W. Gray, *Education on an International Scale: A History of the International Education Board, 1923 - 1938* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1941). There is far more work on Gunn's rural campaigns in China: see especially David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), especially Chapter 1, along with Randall E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898 - 1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and James C. Thomson, *While China Faced West: American Reformers in Nationalist China, 1928 - 1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

chartered in 1913, one of its main goals was to replicate the southern hookworm effort for other tropical diseases. From hookworm the newly founded International Health Board of the RF (IHB, later the International Health Division) began work in the U.S. South on yellow fever, malaria, and ultimately tuberculosis.¹⁰

The leap from regional public health work in the U.S. to destinations abroad came naturally to the Rockefeller philanthropies. In their theorization of the causes of tropical backwardness, poverty, and disease, Mississippi spoke volumes about other Caribbean societies and even countries as far away as India and Egypt. The American South, RF planners believed, simply lay in the northern reaches of a global “hookworm belt” that stretched across the planet’s tropical and semitropical regions. The first global extension of the hookworm campaigns came as early as 1914, when the RF forged an alliance with imperial administrators in London to begin a treatment program in British Guiana. In the following years, International Health Board officials established offices across the Caribbean, Pacific Asia, West Africa, and South America. Doctors trained in the American South often provided leadership abroad, seamlessly moving between plantation districts in Georgia, Cuba, and the Philippines. Hookworm elimination was soon followed, as it had been in the United States, by projects targeted at the insect hosts of other diseases, particularly the mosquito. Working from experimental findings on mosquito reproduction in Bolivar County, Mississippi, and Ashley County, Arkansas, the

¹⁰ On the southern hookworm campaign and its role in spawning further public health efforts, see John Ettling, *The Germ of Laziness: Rockefeller Philanthropy and Public Health in the New South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), and William A. Link, “Privies, Progressivism, and Public Schools: Health Reform and Education in the Rural South, 1909-1920,” *Journal of Southern History* 54, no. 4 (1988). On the southern roots of the malaria, yellow fever, and tuberculosis campaigns, see John Farley, *To Cast out Disease: A History of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, 1913 - 1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially Chapters 6 and 7.

International Health Board began programs of malaria control in Sardinia, Italy, and coastal Madras, India.¹¹

In 1920 the Rockefeller Foundation began negotiations for a cooperative public health project with the Mexican government, under the auspices of a yellow fever campaign in the coastal states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz. Despite the rampant anti-Americanism of the post-Revolutionary era, modernizing, nation-building elites like Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles tolerated and even smiled upon the public health projects of the Rockefeller philanthropies, hoping that a successful RF campaign might bolster their political legitimacy. Historian Anne-Emanuel Birn has argued that the ultimate goal of the Mexican government in recruiting Rockefeller Foundation doctors was not the elimination of disease, but winning over a skeptical and isolated rural population through a demonstration of benevolent state power. In the city of Veracruz, RF public health agents and their Mexican counterparts waged a short but intensive campaign toward eliminating mosquito larvae from domestic water sources, rather than investing in a more expensive, long-term strategy to provide an operational sewage system. Upon receiving quick results, the RF and ruling party claimed their efforts successful, and expanded into hookworm and tuberculosis control across the country.¹²

¹¹ Natalie Ring has made the most persuasive argument for importance of southern regionalism in the RF's global public health campaigns; see "Mapping Regional and Imperial Geographies: Tropical Disease in the U.S. South," in *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, eds. Alfred McCoy and Francisco Scarano (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), "Inventing the Tropical South," *Mississippi Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2003), and her recent monograph *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012). On the early global campaigns of the International Health Board, see Farley, *To Cast Out Disease*. Chapter 7 details the malaria work in the U.S. and abroad.

¹² For the best accounts of Rockefeller philanthropy in Mexico before the agricultural program, see Anne-Emanuelle Birn, *Marriage of Convenience: Rockefeller International Health and Revolutionary Mexico* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006) and Armando Solórzano, "Sowing the Seeds of Neo-Imperialism: The Rockefeller Foundation's Yellow Fever Campaign in Mexico," *International Journal of Health Services* 22, no. 3 (1992), as well as Solórzano's essay in Marcos Cueto, ed., *Missionaries of Science: The Rockefeller Foundation and Latin America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

By the late 1920s, therefore, the Rockefeller Foundation headquarters on 49th Street in New York City was the central hub in a vast philanthropic network that stretched from the American South outward into the Caribbean world and then across the globe to Asia and Africa. In the pursuit of the “well-being of mankind throughout the world” – the RF’s founding motto – hundreds of evangelically minded Americans fanned out across a planet then largely parceled between the European colonial powers. While many of those reformers were undeniably altruistic and devoted to improving human lives, they more often than not understood poverty and “backwardness” as a natural byproduct of race, environment, and culture, rather than uneven global relationships. Due to this misdiagnosis, the agents of Rockefeller philanthropy were more successful in spreading Euro-American belief systems than actually raising standards of living to the level they enjoyed at home. Long before “development” became a household word in the Global North, the Rockefeller philanthropies were engineering a model for the relationship between rich and poor nations that would have lasting consequences.¹³

Yet despite the crucial role that agriculture had played in shaping the Rockefeller family’s philanthropic vision in its earliest years, agricultural improvement played a rather insignificant role in the global campaigns of the RF before the outbreak of the Second World War. In contrast to the funding devoted to public health and education efforts, farming and rural life received little attention between 1915 and 1935. However, in the years leading up to World War II, there would be an internal push to return

¹³ For a number of broad critiques of American philanthropy abroad, see Mark Dowie, *American Foundations: An Investigative History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Robert F. Arnove, ed., *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism: The Foundations at Home and Abroad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), and Edward H. Berman, *The Ideology of Philanthropy: The Influence of the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations on American Foreign Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).

agriculture to the forefront of the Rockefeller campaigns. The following section will examine the early and halting initiative by two North Carolinians to transplant the Rockefeller philanthropies' experience in American agricultural development into Mexico, a country they believed shared the same historical ills that their native South did.

The Early Push for a Mexican Program in Agriculture

No individual better exemplified the tight link between public health work in the U.S. South and the greater Caribbean than John Atkinson Ferrell, a doctor and administrator with the Foundation's International Health Board. Ferrell was born in 1880 to a middling family in Sampson County, North Carolina, an eastern plantation district with a high black population where cotton and tobacco dominated the local economy. After working a few years as a rural teacher and then earning a degree in medicine at the University of North Carolina in 1907, the young Dr. Ferrell joined the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission to participate in the battle against hookworm in North Carolina. Inspired by the General Education Board's campaign to increase agricultural production in Sampson County, Ferrell saw in the Sanitary Commission both a professional opportunity and a chance to aid the poor rural population in eastern North Carolina. By 1912, he was directing hookworm work in all the counties of his home state, and a year later he had risen to become Associate Director of the International Health Board.¹⁴

As the second-in-command of the IHB, Ferrell presided over much of the expansion of the RF public health campaigns into Latin America. Criss-crossing the Caribbean during the 1920s, Ferrell played a major role in coordinating the translation of

¹⁴ On Ferrell's role in the North Carolina hookworm program, see Ettling, *The Germ of Laziness*, 136, Birn, *Marriage of Convenience*, 122, and John A. Ferrell, "The North Carolina Campaign against Hookworm Disease," *American Journal of Public Health* 2, no. 4 (1912).

U.S. southern models into foreign context. When he first traveled to Mexico in 1927 to plan an expansion of the IHB program there, Ferrell viewed the small villages he visited as analogous to those he had observed in the American South. Praising the progress IHB workers and their allies in the Mexican public health service had made outside of Mexico City, Ferrell declared that “so far as number of pit privies is concerned, I might have been in North Carolina.”¹⁵ When he needed medical personnel in Mexico and elsewhere in Central America, he turned to staff members that had proved themselves working in the plantation districts of the U.S. South.¹⁶



Figure 4.2. Portrait of John A. Ferrell from the late 1930s. Perhaps more than any other figure, Ferrell represented the tight bond between Foundation work in the U.S. South and the Global South (from Rockefeller Archive Center, RF Photos, Series 100, Box 6, Folder 152)

¹⁵ “Notes Concerning Dr. Ferrell’s Trip to Mexico, 21 April to 2 May 1927,” Rockefeller Foundation archives (hereafter RFA), Record Group (hereafter RG) 12.1, Diaries of Officers: John A. Ferrell, Reel 1, RAC.

¹⁶ For one example – of many – of Ferrell selecting candidates for Latin American work based on their southern experience, see Ferrell to Henry P. Carr, June 18, 1931, RFA, RG 2, Series 323, Box 58, Folder 474, RAC. Carr was the field director of the International Health Division in Mexico, and was himself a doctor from southern Georgia.

By March 1933, when Ferrell made his third return to Mexico, he grew convinced that public health reform alone was insufficient for combating rural poverty. Just as the Progressive-era General Education Board had sought to boost education and agriculture in cooperation with hookworm eradication, he believed, the Rockefeller Foundation of the 1930s should also consider expanding its Mexican program beyond medicine. In a conference that month with Secretary of Agriculture Francisco S. Elías, Ferrell “[took] the liberty to inquire as to what the government is doing for the advancement of agriculture and if it has in contemplation any new activities in which an agency such as the Foundation might be helpful.” Elías was sympathetic to Ferrell’s gesture, but assured him diplomatically that the Mexican government was fully able to address agricultural concerns on its own. And education, an issue so politically charged in those years, explained Ferrell’s hosts, would be an impossible arena for foreign intervention.¹⁷

Despite the rebuff from the Mexican government, Ferrell pushed from within the Rockefeller Foundation for increased attention to Mexico. In response, during the fall of 1934 the RF sent Selskar Gunn, who was soon to begin his work in China as described earlier, to Mexico to scout out the possibilities for expanding the Foundation’s participation. Touring *ejido* farms and rural schools, Gunn was deeply impressed with the activist role that the state was beginning to play in agrarian issues. However, he counseled his superiors in the RF that because of continuing political instability “it is not

¹⁷ “Notes on Dr. Ferrell’s Trip to Mexico, March 15 – April 21, 1933,” RFA, RG 2, 1933 Stacks, Series 323, Box 558, Folder 3778, RAC, and Ferrell conference with Gastón Melo, March 31, 1933, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

a propitious time to consider enlarging our present small program in Mexico.” Ferrell’s hopes, therefore, found little support in the Foundation’s hierarchy.¹⁸

Only with the arrival to Mexico of a long-time acquaintance from North Carolina did Ferrell find new incentive in his attempt to expand the Foundation’s health program into agriculture. In the spring of 1933, just weeks after Ferrell’s last visit, Josephus Daniels was appointed the American ambassador to Mexico and moved from Raleigh to Mexico City. Daniels was Ferrell’s senior by almost twenty years, and had first come to know the doctor during the early years of the Rockefeller philanthropies’ southern work. Daniels had initially been an angry opponent of the agricultural and public health campaigns, claiming in the pages of his newspaper, the *Raleigh News & Observer*, that southerners should not “canonize Standard Oil Rockefeller” as he sought “to buy the appreciation of the people whom he has been robbing for a quarter of a century.” However, Daniels later admitted that he “got off on the wrong foot.” Likely due to his conversations with Ferrell, a fellow North Carolinian who was leading the Rockefeller effort in his region of the state, Daniels came to admit that both hookworm and low agricultural productivity were massive problems for the region, and that Rockefeller’s donations were achieving a positive impact. After this about-face, Daniels and Ferrell stayed in close touch in the years that followed.¹⁹

In February of 1935, Ferrell visited Mexico City for the first time since Daniels’ diplomatic appointment, with the purpose of reviewing the Mexican programs of the RF’s International Health Division. Rekindling their friendship, Ferrell met with Daniels three times during his stay in Mexico City. During their long meetings, Daniels and

¹⁸ Selskar Gunn, “Notes and Comments on a Visit to Mexico, Sept. 2 – Nov. 15, 1934,” RFA, RG 2, Series 323, Box 100, Folder 790.

¹⁹ Josephus Daniels, *Editor in Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 568-9.

Ferrell weighed the similarities of economic development in their native region and Mexico. After all, by 1935 Daniels had been comparing southern and Mexican rural problems, along with the New Deal and the Mexican Revolution, for nearly two years (see Chapter Two). “The situation in Mexico,” Daniels told Ferrell, was “in many respects quite similar to that in the southern United States after the Civil War,” though “the economic status of the ordinary Mexican family is probably a good deal worse than prevailed in the South.” As in their home region, the “most urgent problem,” argued Daniels, “involves raising the economic level of the people.”²⁰

Daniels’ comparisons were not neutral observation, but under-girded his firm belief that earlier solutions to U.S. southern poverty were applicable to rural Mexico as well. Daniels particularly believed “that the necessary adoption of the program supported by the General Education Board in the South could be worked out, which would strengthen the present efforts” of Mexico’s revolutionary reform and would “lead to an economic base high enough to permit taxes for the payment of services in public health, public education, public welfare, road building, etc.” Dr. Ferrell, along with Charles Bailey, the resident International Health Division coordinator in Mexico City, were in “full accord” with Daniels’ suggestions, and agreed that the Foundation ought to expand its Mexican program dramatically. Fresh with enthusiasm from the discussion at the Embassy, Ferrell began work on a memorandum for the RF chiefs that relied heavily upon Seaman Knapp’s agricultural demonstration program as a model for Mexican work. In it, he suggested that the Foundation devote between \$25,000 and \$100,000 a year “to aid the Government in developing demonstrations of agriculture and other activities

²⁰ John A. Ferrell, “Memorandum Regarding Mexico and IHD Health Program,” February 12, 1935, RFA, RG 2, 1941 Stacks, Series 323, Box 561, Folder 3814, RAC.

intended to improve the economic wellbeing of families and communities.” Mexican trainees might be sent to the United States for “studying procedures,” then return to Mexico to “develop programs adaptable to Mexican conditions.”²¹ Likewise, Ferrell recommended that the RF distribute in Mexico “publications dealing with the rehabilitation of the U.S. South” translated into Spanish “as an aid for Mexican agricultural and educational development.”²²

On his way back to New York from Mexico City after the meetings with Daniels, Ferrell stopped in Raleigh to seek the guidance of Jane S. McKimmon, another long-time acquaintance from the Progressive-era Rockefeller campaigns in agriculture and public health. McKimmon had joined the ranks of Knapp’s farm demonstrators in 1911 as North Carolina’s first female agent. In the state’s eastern plantation districts, she supervised girls’ tomato and canning clubs, as corn was considered a crop unfit for female cultivation, and later pioneered the teaching of home economics to southern farm women. By the time Ferrell sat down with her in Raleigh in the early days of March 1935, she was the director of women’s 4-H club work in North Carolina. Like Ferrell and Daniels had done earlier, they discussed how the problems of the American South spoke to the experiences of poor rural nations across the world, particularly Mexico. “Mexico’s main problem now is economic,” Ferrell declared, “just as was the case in the Southern States for three decades or more following the Civil War.” McKimmon was swayed by Ferrell’s comparison, and agreed to mail to him literature on the role of farm demonstration and club work in southern economic development. Upon receiving McKimmon’s bundle of publications, Ferrell forwarded them along to Bailey and Daniels for distribution to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Charles Bailey to John A. Ferrell, February 22, 1935, RFA, RG 2, Series 323, Box 119, Folder 907, RAC. In the letter, Bailey summarizes what he and Ferrell had discussed earlier.

Mexican officials, along with the General Education Board's first annual report from 1913.²³

Daniels too added his momentum to the push, seeking to persuade a friend of his, Raymond B. Fosdick, to support the plan for extending southern rural models into Mexico. Fosdick was a crucial figure within the world of Rockefeller philanthropy. A Princeton-educated lawyer and former student of Woodrow Wilson, Fosdick shared Wilson's internationalism and evangelical desire for moral reform. During the First World War, Fosdick worked first with anti-vice and -prostitution campaigns among troops stationed on the U.S.-Mexico border, and then went to Europe in the final days of the war to plan the League of Nations. It was in those years that he had also grown close with Secretary of the Navy Daniels, who shared Fosdick's Progressive moralizing instinct. When Fosdick returned to the United States after the catastrophe at Versailles, he sought other outlets for global reform, and rekindled his acquaintance with John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Both Rockefeller and Fosdick fumed at the escalating isolationism in American politics, and saw a reformist American internationalism as the key to avoiding another world war. By the mid-1920s, Fosdick had grown to be a considerable force within the Rockefeller philanthropies, serving Junior much as Frederick Gates had advised Rockefeller's father. Fosdick held no official administrative position but sat

²³ Ferrell to Charles Bailey, March 4, 1935, RFA, RG 2, Series 323, Box 119, Folder 907, RAC. For evidence of Ferrell mailing publications to Daniels, see John Ferrell to Josephus Daniels, March 7, 1935, Daniels papers, General Correspondence, Reel 62, LoC. On McKimmon's life, see Jane Simpson McKimmon, *When We're Green We Grow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), and Louise Benner, "Jane McKimmon," NCPedia.org, <http://ncpedia.org/biography/mckimmon-jane> (last accessed September 11, 2012).

prominently on the boards of trustees of both the Rockefeller Foundation and General Education Board.²⁴

Having kept in touch with Fosdick frequently since the World War, Josephus Daniels viewed his friend as a potential ally, and wrote to him two weeks after Ferrell had left Mexico City. After describing Ferrell's recent visit, Daniels told Fosdick, as he had earlier argued to Ferrell, that Mexico's problems mirrored those of the post-bellum South. As a solution to the low standard of living in Mexico's countryside, an adaptation of the General Education Board's U.S. southern campaign in agriculture "will make for real progress" "if the task is entrusted to men who can cooperate." The demonstration of scientific farming methods to Mexico's *campesinos*, Daniels believed, could raise production and ultimately the economic index of the rural poor. To lead the task of adapting the Foundation's southern program to Mexico, Daniels argued that John Ferrell would be the best candidate, as "his actual participation in the South in the educational, health, agricultural and economic developments fit him for guiding in a larger cooperative program in Mexico." Daniels likewise claimed that he and Ferrell "can work together for the development of cooperation in health and welfare movements for Mexico as we did for the development of the South." Explicitly, Daniels' model for Mexican rural development was the General Education Board's efforts of the Progressive Era.²⁵

Yet despite Daniels' continued exhortations and a May 1935 visit to New York to plead his case, the Rockefeller Foundation leadership displayed little enthusiasm about

²⁴ On Fosdick's early life and career, see Daryl L. Revoldt, "Raymond B. Fosdick: Reform, Internationalism, and the Rockefeller Foundation," (Ph.D. diss., University of Akron, 1982; Cullather, *The Hungry World*, 28-30, and Fosdick's autobiography, *Chronicle of a Generation: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958).

²⁵ Josephus Daniels to Raymond Fosdick, March 5, 1935, Series 1.1, Box 6, Folder 40, Josephus Daniels papers, Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

expanding their small Mexican public health program into agriculture. Likely responding to Selskar Gunn's 1934 report warning of political instability, and witnessing the political ferment of the early years of the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency, neither Fosdick nor the leaders of the Foundation replied to Daniels' pleas. Ferrell continued to push from the inside of the institution, but by November of 1935 even he admitted to Daniels that he had "not been able to find a way for securing aid in this direction," though he nevertheless believed that Daniels' "efforts undoubtedly will be more fruitful than mine, hence I trust you will continue them."²⁶

That winter, however, Raymond Fosdick was elected President of both the Rockefeller Foundation and the General Education Board, to take office in the summer of 1936. The two North Carolinians believed that this represented a new opportunity for expanding their influence, and redoubled their efforts. Daniels wrote to Fosdick in March of that year, and insisted that Fosdick must visit Mexico personally to witness both the "great progress" made by the Cárdenas government in social policy and the opportunities for expanding the Rockefeller program in the nation.²⁷ Such a program, Daniels ventured to say in a later letter, exemplified the "dream that you and I and Woodrow Wilson and others had in 1919."²⁸ Ferrell too renewed his push, first by sending along more information from Jane McKimmon to the Mexican RF office, and then composing a memorandum to Fosdick in late 1936, which he also forwarded to Daniels.²⁹ The memo urged a "program of activities designed to improve economic condition in Mexico." Once again, such a campaign would be modeled after the "program of the General Education

²⁶ Ferrell to Daniels, November 6, 1935, Daniels papers, General Correspondence, Reel 64, LoC.

²⁷ Daniels to Fosdick, March 3, 1936, Daniels papers, General Correspondence, Reel 65, LoC.

²⁸ Daniels to Fosdick, July 21, 1936, Daniels papers, General Correspondence, Reel 67, LoC.

²⁹ Ferrell to Charles Bailey, February 26, 1936, RFA, RG 2, Series 323, Box 134, Folder 1006, RAC.

Board in the South from 1905 to 1914.”³⁰ If the Rockefeller Foundation sought to return its emphasis on agriculture, believed Daniels and Ferrell, 1936 was the moment to do it.

Their efforts, however, again engendered little more than frustration. While it is clear that Fosdick reviewed Ferrell’s memorandum, there is no evidence of his responding to it, nor to Daniels’ requests. Over the course of 1937 and 1938, both Daniels and Ferrell slowed their efforts toward a Mexican agricultural campaign in response to the apparent RF reluctance. Despite his trust for and friendship with Ferrell, Daniels even began to cultivate a sense of resigned bitterness toward the Rockefeller philanthropies. In March of 1937, Daniels angrily wrote in his diary that “as they get millions here from oil fields they ought to do it; they expend millions of dollars in China to only a few thousand in Mexico.”³¹ A year later, he privately asserted that the Rockefeller family had a “moral debt” to repay because of their large profits made from Mexican oil. Though the Rockefeller Foundation and Standard Oil were entirely separate entities in this era, with little overlap in personnel or budgeting, Daniels was representative of a common popular reflex in both Mexico and the United States to link the philanthropy with the oil company, no matter how close their actual connection was.³²

Ferrell and Daniels’ hope for an ambitious program of agricultural reform in Mexico had by the late 1930s stalled with little hope of revival. But in the midst of their frustration, political transformations in the U.S. and Mexico, the outbreak of war in Europe and Asia, and a reorientation of the Rockefeller philanthropies shifted the tide in

³⁰ Ferrell memorandum to Fosdick, October 16, 1936, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 63, RAC. Ferrell forwarded this along to Daniels in Ferrell to Daniels, November 6, 1936, Daniels papers, General Correspondence, Reel 67, LoC.

³¹ Daniels diary entry, March 27, 1937, Daniels papers, Diaries, Reel 6, LoC.

³² Daniels diary entry, February 26, 1938, Daniels papers, Diaries, Reel 6, LoC. In the early days of the RF and GEB, there had been an active Rockefeller family presence among the leadership of both institutions; by the 1930s this was far less the case.

their favor. Next, I explore how during the mid- and late 1930s both the General Education Board and Rockefeller Foundation returned their gaze to the rural U.S. South. By 1941, when the RF began negotiations with the Mexican government, the distant memory of the Knapp campaigns was therefore complemented by a current and thriving program of “rural reconstruction” across the Cotton Belt that would significantly inspire their program south of the border.

A Return to the South

The General Education Board had been founded in 1903 as an explicitly regional institution, but by the beginning of the 1920s, its southern emphasis had been deeply eroded. GEB money was by then finding its way into the coffers of colleges and universities across the nation, the majority of them outside of the South.³³ Yet during the 1930s, with the worsening of the Great Depression, the GEB began a slow rededication of its efforts to the region in which it had begun its career. What prompted this transformation, more than anything, was the Board’s observation of the Depression’s impact upon the lives of African-Americans. Even during the 1920s, when the GEB had begun looking beyond the South, it had retained its commitment to black education. Therefore, when in 1930 and 1931 the GEB’s trustees witnessed the deepening desperation that black communities faced as a result of the crash, they feared that the gains of the previous generation were being rapidly washed away.³⁴

³³ For example, see the list of activities in the *Annual Report of the General Education Board, 1928-1929* (New York: General Education Board, 1930). The vast majority of beneficiaries were located in regions outside the American South.

³⁴ On the impact of the Depression on the GEB, see Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving*, Chapter XVII.

In early 1931, the GEB began its re-examination of southern problems when its leadership commissioned Albert R. Mann to do a study of how land-grant universities and various branches of the U.S. Department of Agriculture were responding to the Depression's effect on black farmers. Mann is a crucial actor to this story, because a decade later, he would be leading the Rockefeller Foundation into Mexico. Born in Pennsylvania in 1880, Mann had been a student and close ally of the renowned agrarian intellectual Liberty Hyde Bailey, whose humanistic approach to agriculture Mann shared. Mann had spent several years in Europe during the 1920s studying agricultural reform for the Rockefeller-funded International Education Board, but by the early 1930s he was the dean of New York's State College of Agriculture at Cornell. Despite his lack of southern roots or pedigree, Mann was deeply interested in that region's agriculture, and he willingly accepted the assignment from the GEB. After several weeks of travel across the cotton South in February 1931, Mann submitted a report to the Board that was a damning indictment of the white rural establishment's indifference to black poverty. "Problems peculiar to Negroes," argued Mann, were completely ignored by agricultural experiment stations and white land-grant institutions. Any positive impact of the USDA's Extension Service upon black farmers, he likewise claimed, was "essentially incidental." As "there can be no serious doubt of the ability of the Negro graduates to enter successfully many fields now closed to them by reason of color," Mann demanded the inclusion of blacks in the institutions of the emerging rural welfare state.³⁵

As a critical investigation of race and the government's role in rural America, Mann's GEB report was an important first step in highlighting the deepening southern

³⁵ Albert R. Mann, "Report on Inspection of Negro Land-Grant Colleges in Certain States, and Visits to Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes," March 4, 1931, GEBP, Series 1.2, Box 326, Folder 3390, RAC.

crisis of the 1930s. But the real momentum behind a renewed Rockefeller program in the cotton belt came from the intellectual contributions of a rising school of southern academics led by Howard Washington Odum, whose efforts placed southern underdevelopment in the national spotlight. From his base at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Georgia-born Odum and a host of other rural sociologists began in the 1920s to expound on the regional problems of race, poverty, and waste. Breaking with the preceding generation of white southern academics who were reluctant to critique the status quo, Odum and peers like Rupert Vance and Arthur Raper clothed their attack on the region's racial politics and uneven distribution of resources not in the fiery rhetoric of an H.L. Mencken, but in the detached, quantitative style of the emerging social sciences. Odum and his followers found enormous support from the Rockefeller philanthropies, receiving countless thousands of dollars in funding from both the General Education Board and the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1936, Odum published his magnum opus *Southern Regions*, funded in large part by the GEB, which hid a rather simple thesis beneath its hundreds of pages of dry prose: the South was a rich land inhabited by poor people. That contradiction, Odum argued, was the product of poor planning and inefficient resource use, and could be reversed by scientific, rational management – a conclusion that would be profoundly influential within the increasingly aggressive New Deal.³⁶

³⁶ Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936). On Odum's career and its influence across the South, see George Tindall, "The Significance of Howard W. Odum to Southern History: A Preliminary Estimate," *Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 3 (1958), Wayne Brazil, *Howard W. Odum: The Building Years, 1884-1930* (New York: Garland, 1988), and Lynn Moss Sanders, *Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance through African-American Folk Studies* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

Odum's compelling but decidedly non-radical explanation for southern backwardness, along with the attention it generated, inspired action within the GEB. In the late fall of 1935, as Odum was preparing *Southern Regions* for publication, the GEB organized a conference in Washington, D.C. titled "Opportunities and Needs in the Southern States" to discuss the implications of Odum's findings and conclusions. Invited to discuss regional problems alongside the author were Will Alexander of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, John Ferrell of the International Health Division, Albert Mann of Cornell, and a number of other reform-minded academics.³⁷ The attendees diagnosed four main fields where philanthropic efforts might be focused: "the cotton and tobacco economy," "land tenure and utilization," political organizations, and race relations. Albert Mann, speaking to the conference's attendees, strongly recommended that southern agriculture might be a new area of emphasis for the Rockefeller boards.³⁸

Jackson Davis, the GEB representative who had organized the conference and had earlier led much of the agency's work in black education, was particularly impressed with Mann's suggestion that the Board begin an ambitious study of southern agriculture and its social and environmental problems. Mann, Davis believed, might be the right person to lead such a campaign. Upon the latter's urging Mann and Davis traveled together across the South in May of 1936, visiting institutions of higher education and examining transformations in agriculture and rural life. After lengthy discussions on the road, they came to agree that the time was ripe for the GEB to recommit to a southern rural program

³⁷ "Conference on Opportunities and Needs in the Southern States," November 10, 1935, GEBCP, Series 1.3, Box 409, Folder 4297, RAC.

³⁸ Jackson Davis, "Southern Program," December 2, 1935, GEBCP, Series 1.3, Box 409, Folder 4298, RAC.

that would fund agricultural research and education, “comparable in significance,” Davis hoped, “to that of the farm demonstration work” a generation earlier.³⁹

The decisive turning point in the GEB’s reemphasis of southern regional issues came in 1936 when Raymond Fosdick took over the leadership of both the General Education Board and the Rockefeller Foundation. Like his close friend John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Fosdick believed that the South remained a blighted region that demanded the philanthropy’s action, and the Depression only made this a more immediate need. Like many of his peers in the Rockefeller world, Fosdick looked to Odum and southern rural sociology for an understanding of regional backwardness. *Southern Regions*, Fosdick told one colleague, was the “authoritative text on Southern conditions,” while *The Wasted Land*, a brief distillation of Odum’s book by Gerald Johnson, presented all of the “important issues in a program of rural reconstruction in the South.”⁴⁰ Upon taking leadership of the GEB in the summer of 1936, Fosdick began an aggressive reorientation of the philanthropy’s funding toward southern rural problems. The GEB would not lead this charge alone. Fosdick envisioned that the Rockefeller Foundation, which he was also then President of, would join forces with the GEB in an “inter-department attack on the educational and social problems of the South.”⁴¹ That winter, the GEB inaugurated its “New Southern Program,” and by July 1937, Fosdick had convinced Albert Mann to leave Cornell and begin his tenure as its director.⁴²

³⁹ Jackson Davis interview with Albert R. Mann, June 9, 1936, GEBCP, Series 1.2, Box 326, Folder 3389, RAC; for Mann’s notes on the trip see Albert R. Mann, “Rural Economic and Social Studies in Southern Institutions,” May 12, 1936, GEBCP, Series 1.2, Box 326, Folder 3389, RAC.

⁴⁰ Raymond Fosdick to Thomas Debevoise, March 15, 1938, Rockefeller Family papers, Rockefeller Boards, Box 16, Folder 160, RAC; Gerald W. Johnson, *The Wasted Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937).

⁴¹ Raymond Fosdick diary entry, May 6, 1938, RFA, Officer Diaries microfilm (digitized), RAC.

⁴² Raymond Fosdick to Albert R. Mann, June 2, 1937, GEBCP, Series 1.2, Box 201, Folder 1909, RAC, and *General Education Board Annual Report, 1936-1937* (New York: General Education Board, 1938).

Between 1937 and his retirement in 1946, Mann oversaw the General Education Board's rededication to problems of rural life in the American South. Like Seaman Knapp's campaigns, the New Southern Program was aimed at the "building up of an economy that could support adequate educational institutions," as Fosdick wrote later.⁴³ It did so, however, not by creating an autonomous agency that would itself work on the ground, as would later be the case in Mexico, but by serving as a clearinghouse that channeled Rockefeller money to a wide network of reformers in academia and the federal government. In the coming years, the New Southern Program breathed new life into Odum's Institute for Research in Social Science; it funded research on land tenure at the University of Arkansas and small-scale rural industries at Clemson Agricultural College in South Carolina. GEB money went toward agroecology in Senoia, Georgia and biracial community development in Greenville, South Carolina. A complete listing of the GEB's southern grants would fill many pages, but at its core, the grant-making of the New Southern Program was oriented at overcoming the legacy of the plantation system and establishing rural stability in the post-cotton world. As Mann wrote in 1938, "land economics, especially land tenure and utilization" as well as the persistence of "plantation folkways" continued to "inhibit southern progress under present conditions."⁴⁴ The question to Mann was not "simply what the South can produce," but what "it can produce on an economically sound and profitable basis in the long pull."⁴⁵

⁴³ Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 270.

⁴⁴ Albert R. Mann, "Some Background Observations for Southern Programs of the Rockefeller Boards," May 20, 1938, RFA, RG 3.1, Series 900, Box 26, Folder 212, RAC.

⁴⁵ *General Education Board Annual Report, 1936-1937*, 14. Details on various programs can be found in the GEB annual reports, 1937 through 1940. On the Georgia agroecology program, see S.B. Detwiler to Albert R. Mann, July 23, 1940, GEBCP, Series 1.2, Box 272, Folder 2817, RAC; on the Greenville project, see Fred McCuiston to George C. Payne, February 7, 1941, RFA, RG 6.13, Series 1.1, Box 33, Folder 366, RAC.

Frequently, the reform vision of the New Southern Program cross-pollinated with an increasingly aggressive rural New Deal, which the Rockefeller directors looked to for inspiration. In the summer of 1940, the GEB partnered with Fisk University and the Tuskegee Institute in funding a Fisk-based program to train African-American “rural social engineers” for work with the Farm Security Administration after their graduation.⁴⁶ A few months later, Albert Mann recommended that the Rockefeller philanthropies might well look to the Farm Security Administration’s nutrition programs because their work was “very much along the general lines” that they themselves were interested in pursuing.⁴⁷ And when Selskar Gunn – the Rockefeller Foundation’s Vice President that had previously worked in Chinese agriculture – returned to the United States in 1939 after his exit from Chinese reform, he was commissioned by the New Southern Program to study how the New Deal aimed to transform rural life in the South. After touring the works of the Tennessee Valley Authority and visiting flagship Farm Security Administration sites in Greene County, Georgia, and Coffee County, Alabama, Gunn was astonished at the ambitious steps that the New Deal was taking. The USDA’s vision for the rural South, Gunn claimed, was of “great significance not only as a palliative but as an indication of lines which may lead to what might be considered long-term remedies.” The New Deal’s growing aggressiveness on rural social problems, therefore, made a deep impact on the philanthropies’ leadership.⁴⁸

Rockefeller heavyweights like Raymond Fosdick and Albert Mann did not only follow the New Southern Program remotely from their offices in New York. They

⁴⁶ Charles S. Johnson to Fred McCuistion, June 29, 1940, GEBP, Series 1.3, Box 421, Folder 4416, RAC.

⁴⁷ Albert Mann to Jackson Davis, September 27, 1940, GEBP, Series 1.2, Box 273, Folder 2840, RAC.

⁴⁸ Selskar Gunn, “The Southeast: Notes and Comments on a Visit,” May 1941, GEBP, Series 1.3, Box 436, Folder 4568, RAC.

frequently took extended trips across the Cotton Belt to survey the results of their grant programs and the state of the region in these tumultuous years. In May of 1940, GEB elder Jackson Davis led Fosdick, Mann, and John D. Rockefeller III on a tour of the piedmont and coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia. They desired to see the gritty realities of rural life, as well as the progress made by their programs and the New Deal. At one stop, the New Yorkers shocked a white landlord host when they asked “to see some of the poorer conditions among white and Negro sharecroppers,” which “upset [their host]’s plans as he had expected to show us the good places.”⁴⁹ An October 1940 trip to Arkansas by the same four men had similar goals, and they toured the state’s Delta and Ozark regions with T. Roy Reid, the regional administrator of the Farm Security Administration. They witnessed “economic and cultural stratification” across the state and the “distressing condition of people in the poorer types of soil on the hill farms.” Neither schools, the USDA’s Extension Service, nor the universities “serve these people effectively,” mused Rockefeller III. Such observations made deep impressions.⁵⁰

Through these journeys and with their administration of a renewed program in southern rural reform, the leadership of the Rockefeller philanthropies first grappled with the difficult questions that would later shape the Green Revolution. What were the structural obstacles to overcoming rural poverty? How did power relations across the lines of race and class shape the organization of agriculture? And how could a small group of reformers hope to make a dent in social and economic patterns that were generations old? While Fosdick, Mann, and their peers were predominantly observers in these early years, their engagement with the crisis of the Depression-era South proved a

⁴⁹ Jackson Davis, “Trip Report,” May 15, 1940, GEBP, Series 1.3, Box 475, Folder 5058, RAC.

⁵⁰ John D. Rockefeller III, “Trip to Arkansas,” October 7, 1940, John D. Rockefeller III Papers (RG 5), Box 87, Folder 733, Rockefeller Family Papers, RAC.

lasting influence. By 1940, just months before the Rockefeller philanthropies' first intervention in Mexican agriculture, its leadership could draw upon a generation of regional expertise within the United States. Seaman Knapp's campaign in farm demonstration, then thirty years behind them, was an obvious precedent. But just as important were their simultaneous interactions with a vast network of southern liberals and the rural New Deal. The weight of such models and memories would be considerable as they went abroad.

In retrospect, the path from the New Southern Program to the Mexican Agricultural Program might seem obvious. But in 1940, few within the Rockefeller world could have predicted what was to come. Earlier attempts to transplant southern models in Mexico, as John Ferrell and Josephus Daniels had attempted, had failed. It would only be in December of that year, with the unexpected visit to Mexico of the New Deal's most prominent ambassador, that the rural histories of the U.S. South and Mexico would become so inextricably tangled.

Henry A. Wallace and the Road to Mexico

In both Mexico and the United States, 1940 was a year of dramatic political transitions. Since the spring of 1938, when Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized the Mexican petroleum industry, his presidency began a slow but steady retreat from its most socially activist policies. Mexican conservatives, primarily landowners, the clergy, and industrialists, escalated their campaign to discredit the President and successfully forced the regime into a defensive stance. Land redistribution, after peaking in 1938, began to slow down in the last two years of the *sexenio*, and Cárdenas pressured labor leaders to

refrain from strikes. The president's symbolic support for the revolution in Spain, a movement that failed in early 1939, also seemed to foreshadow the decline of Mexico's internationalist leftism.

In early 1940, representatives of the Partido Revolucionario Mexicano (the new name that Cárdenas gave the Partido Nacional Revolucionario in 1938) convened to choose their candidate for the July election. In a surprise to many, Cárdenas snubbed his predicted successor, the radical Francisco Múgica, in favor of a less-known, middle-of-the-road candidate: Manuel Avila Camacho, Cárdenas' defense minister and a military leader from the central state of Puebla. Yet despite Cárdenas' compromise in choosing his successor, conservatives were not satisfied. They challenged Avila Camacho with the selection of an opposition candidate, Juan Andreu Almazán, a northerner who enjoyed the broad support of businessmen and the middle classes. When in July Avila Camacho claimed victory in an undoubtedly rigged election, Almazán contested the ruling and promised an armed revolt if the government did not recognize his rightful claim by the presidential inauguration on December 1, 1940. The months between July and December, therefore, as each side contested the other through both congressional debates and bloody street brawls, were set to be a referendum on the future of Cardenismo in Mexico.⁵¹

As Mexico's political elite leaned rightward in the middle of 1940, the United States leaned toward the left. With his eyes on the developing European war, Franklin Roosevelt had no plans to relinquish power after eight years, and declared an unprecedented third candidacy for office. There was little contention within the Democratic Party, but in July 1940, when party leaders convened in Chicago to choose

⁵¹ On the transition from Cárdenas to Avila Camacho and the 1940 election, see Friedrich Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934 - 1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), Chapter 8.

Roosevelt's vice-presidential candidate, there erupted a bitter fight over who would receive the post. Eying Roosevelt's health, which was already showing signs of deterioration, Party leaders across the country recognized the importance of the position. Southern Democratic conservatives were adamant about placing an ally of theirs on the ticket, especially as they had grown increasingly at odds with the President in recent years. Roosevelt's Vice President during his first two terms had been John Nance Garner, a conservative Texan, and in July of 1940 the southern wing sought a similar appointment. But Roosevelt and his allies, bitter toward the southern wing's obstructionism toward the New Deal, pushed through the nomination not of Alabamian William Bankhead or the Texan Jesse Jones, but of Henry Agard Wallace, the New Deal's Secretary of Agriculture and one of the chief architects of its agrarian program.⁵²

To many southerners, Wallace represented the socially aggressive New Deal at high tide, and his selection infuriated conservative Democrats. Wallace is an enigmatic figure, largely forgotten to American popular memory, but in his life's contradictions are wound up the great questions of the twentieth century's rural transformations, not only in the United States but across the world. Born in Iowa in 1888, Wallace was the scion of a family of agricultural leaders. His grandfather had founded the popular *Wallaces' Farmer* newspaper, and his father Henry C. Wallace had been U.S. Secretary of Agriculture during the early 1920s. As an introverted young man, Henry A. devoted his time and passion to corn breeding, and founded in 1926 the Hi-Bred Corn Company, the first commercial seed company to develop and sell hybridized corn seed. While scholars since

⁵² On the political struggle for the 1940 nomination, see David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 456-457, and John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), Chapter 11.

have blamed Wallace for instigating the penetration of capital and profit motives into every element of agriculture, Wallace believed that technology and increased production could save the small-scale agriculture that he championed, not destroy it. He was profoundly humanistic, sensitive to the cultural significance of farm life, and critical of attempts to remake rural America in the image of the city or factory.⁵³

When he joined Roosevelt's cabinet in 1933, Wallace was initially cautious toward the more aggressive political ideologues that surrounded him, such as Rexford Tugwell and Jerome Frank. He had, after all, come from a Republican family and had himself voted Republican for most of his life. The initial conservatism of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration reflected this (see Chapter Two), and when political conflict flared in his department, as it did in 1935 between urban liberals and rural conservatives, Wallace chose to avoid a confrontation with entrenched interests and fired the younger leftist contingent. But in the later years of the New Deal, Wallace underwent a sort of political reawakening, as he confronted the poverty of a rural America that was far different from the Iowa farm he had grown up on. Wallace's wide-eyed journeys through the American South, which he made frequently during 1937 and 1938, played a decisive role in that radicalization. His crucial role in the forging of activist agencies like the Farm Security Administration testified to his conversion. By the time of his selection as Vice President, Wallace had developed a deep sensitivity of the social impacts of technological

⁵³ Wallace's life has been chronicled by a number of scholars; see primarily Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, Edward L. and Frederick H. Schapsmeier's two volumes, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa: The Agrarian Years, 1910 - 1940* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1968) and *Prophet in Politics: Henry A. Wallace and the War Years, 1940 - 1965* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1970), along with Russell Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947).

transformations; he wrote in the summer of 1940 that agricultural development should be “putting people first and machines and land second and third.”⁵⁴

Wallace had also, for many years, cultivated a deep interest in Latin America. That interest had originally grown from Wallace’s fascination with corn, a plant native to Mexico, but during the latter half of the 1930s it expanded into a near-obsession with all things Hispanophone. By 1940, Wallace spoke slow but confident Spanish and was hosting weekly Spanish record-listening parties at his home in Washington. Therefore, in November of 1940, as the Mexican inauguration neared and Roosevelt began to worry about an Almazán-led revolt shattering hemispheric stability, the U.S. President decided to send his vice-president-elect to attend Avila Camacho’s inauguration. Wallace’s presence, Roosevelt hoped, would clearly signal American support for Cárdenas’ party and its candidate, as well as making gestures toward pan-American unity. It would be the first visit to Mexico of a major American official since the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910. The American press heralded the trip as an historic display of leftist solidarity. Mexico’s revolutionary government, wrote the *New York Times*, had the “fortunate coincidence” of welcoming Wallace, “America’s apostle of social experimentation.”⁵⁵

Instead of traveling south in a large diplomatic caravan, Wallace chose to drive his own car from Washington to Mexico City, so as to get a better sense of the Mexican countryside. Upon crossing the Mexican border, he was joined by the soon-to-be

⁵⁴ Henry A. Wallace, “Farmers and Machines,” Henry A. Wallace papers, University of Iowa microfilm, Reel 22, accessed at LoC. On Wallace’s role in the rural New Deal and his political evolution, see Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982); for a revisionist interpretation see Jess Gilbert, “Agrarian Intellectuals in a Democratizing State: A Collective Biography of USDA Leaders in the Intended New Deal,” in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America*, ed. Catherine M. Stock, and Robert D. Johnston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) and Mary Summers, “The New Deal Farm Programs: Looking for Reconstruction in American Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000).

⁵⁵ “A New Era of Friendship Dawns in United States – Mexico Relations,” December 1, 1940, *New York Times*. On Wallace’s Latin American music gatherings, see Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 260.

agriculture secretary Marte R. Gómez, who served as his tour guide and would become a lifelong friend. As they drove southward, Wallace and Gómez stopped countless times to speak with farmers, visit *ejidal* schools, and inspect cornfields, often to the great frustration of schedule-minded State Department coordinators. Crossing the states of Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí, Wallace marveled both at the poverty of rural people but also at the recent efforts of the Mexican state to reverse inequality. Describing the visit to *Wallaces' Farmer* readers, the former USDA chief noted that “land hunger” permeated the countryside. “*Ejidors*,” wrote Wallace in his family’s newspaper after explaining Cárdenas’ land reform campaign, “are a bit like self-subsistence farm projects.” But Mexican farmers were realizing, Wallace observed, that “revolution by itself does not increase the farm output of Mexico.” To raise productivity “will take education, improved methods, and hard work.” The *ejidal* schools that Wallace visited, therefore, “will probably do more than any other single thing to determine the productivity of the agriculture and the quality of life in Mexico fifty years hence.”⁵⁶

Arriving to Mexico City on November 29, Wallace prepared for the inauguration and its accompanying social functions. The evening of December 1 brought together a diverse crowd at the National Palace, very much epitomizing the transnational agrarian dialogue of the 1930s. Wallace and Josephus Daniels, an old acquaintance of the U.S. Vice President-to-be, appeared together and discussed farm policy with Lázaro Cárdenas, Manuel Avila Camacho, and Marte Gómez. Other formal invitees from the U.S. government included Norman Littell, chief of the Justice Department’s Lands Division,

⁵⁶ All quotes but the very last are from Henry A. Wallace, “Land Hunger in Mexico,” *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, March 22, 1941. Last quote on *ejidal* schools is from Henry A. Wallace, “Wallace in Mexico: Corn Growing South of the Border,” *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, February 22, 1941.

as well as Marvin Jones, the Texas representative who had earlier sponsored the Bankhead bill in the House.⁵⁷ Also joining them at the National Palace was the ubiquitous Frank Tannenbaum, who had been invited by Cárdenas and had not seen Wallace since their work together on the Bankhead Bill at the USDA in 1935.⁵⁸ After hearing Avila Camacho's inaugural address on his plans to marry agricultural science small landholding, the American and Mexican guests walked over to the Palace of Fine Arts to watch the Tomás Escobedo play "The Song of the *Ejido*," which mythologized land redistribution as the crowning achievement of the Mexican Revolution.⁵⁹



Figure 4.3. Welcome parade with banners for Henry A. Wallace in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, late November 1940. Wallace enjoyed a popularity in Mexico that was unprecedented among American politicians of his era (from *Life*, December 16, 1940)

⁵⁷ Department of State memorandum on American visitors, December 5, 1940, RG 59, 812.001 Camacho, Manuel A/122A, Box 4112, Folder 3, NA.

⁵⁸ On Frank Tannenbaum's participation, see Tannenbaum diary entry, December 2, 1940, Series VII, Box 57, Frank Tannenbaum Papers, Columbia University, New York, NY, and Josephus Daniels appointment notes, December 2, 1940, Diaries, Reel 7, Daniels papers, LoC.

⁵⁹ On their attendance at the play "Canción del *Ejido*," see Josephus Daniels, "Revised Outline of Activities of Special Mission," November 30, 1940, Josephus Daniels papers, Box 28, Folder 8, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, NC.

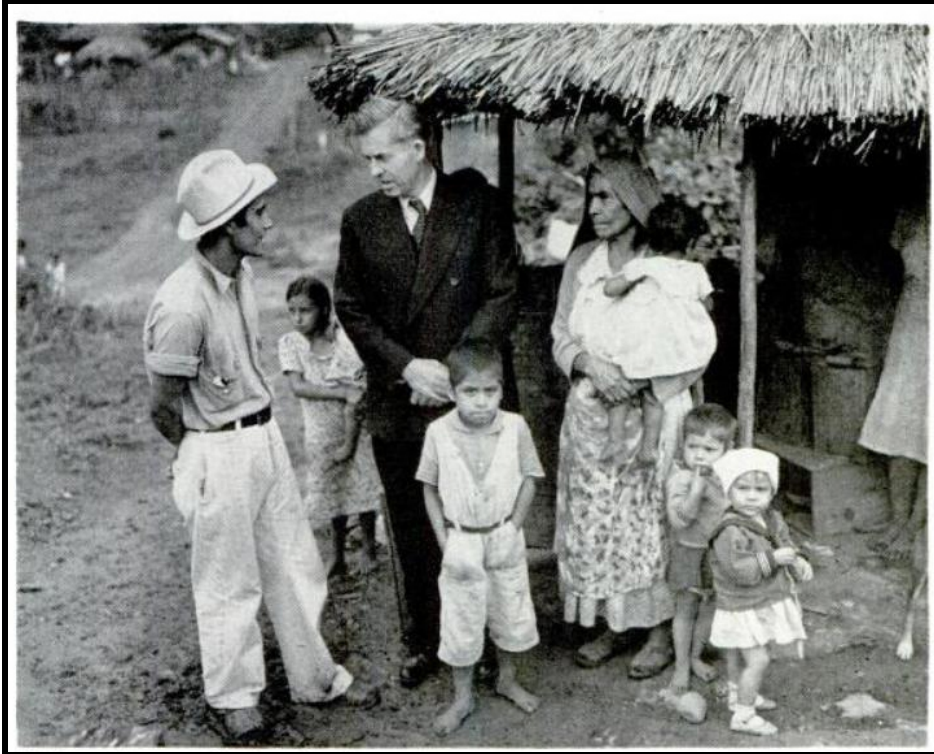


Figure 4.4. Wallace speaking with a family in Tamazunchale, San Luis Potosí, late November 1940. On his trip, Wallace made a dedicated effort to meet with common rural people. (from *Life*, December 16, 1940)



Figure 4.5. Attendees at Manuel Avila Camacho's inauguration, December 1940. Here, Cárdenas, Wallace, and Daniels meet on the evening of the inauguration. The group symbolized the union of the New Deal and Cardenismo (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Lot 5402 G)

Once he was in central Mexico, Wallace decided to turn his brief diplomatic visit into an extended vacation that would last into the new year, with the foremost purpose of continuing his study of Mexican corn. He stayed several days at the U.S. embassy in Mexico City, and then accompanied Marte Gómez to visit the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo. The two men spoke at length about how science might bolster the *ejido* system, and Wallace insisted that “one of the most important jobs is to increase the yield per *hectarea* [sic] of corn and beans.”⁶⁰ Upon Gómez’s suggestion, Wallace traveled later in the week to León, Guanajuato, where the Agriculture Secretariat’s central corn breeding station was operated by Eduardo Limón. Limón had earned a Master’s degree at Iowa State University in the early 1930s, and from him Wallace hoped to get “the inside picture of the experimental work in the [Mexican] Department of Agriculture.” At León, Wallace evaluated the corn breeding program and suggested methods for how the station might work toward effective hybrids and other improved varieties. Finally, Wallace retreated with his wife to Lake Pátzcuaro in the western state of Michoacán, before beginning the long journey back to the United States.⁶¹

Of the many people that Wallace would meet with in Mexico, perhaps none more influenced his understanding of Mexico than Ambassador Josephus Daniels. While they had known each other as liberal New Deal allies for many years, over the course of Wallace’s week-long stay with Daniels in Mexico City, Wallace “got very well acquainted” with the Ambassador and “came to have a very high esteem for him.”⁶² In

⁶⁰ Henry A. Wallace to Marte R. Gómez, January 3, 1941, Cartas, 1941, Q-Z, Archivo Marte R. Gómez, Mexico City (hereafter AMRG).

⁶¹ *The Reminiscences of Henry A. Wallace*, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, New York, 1287-1288.

⁶² *Ibid.*



Figure 4.6. Henry Wallace, Josephus Daniels, and their wives Ilo and Addie at the American Embassy in Mexico City, December 1940. The two men grew close during Wallace's visit, discussing the confluence of U.S. and Mexican economic and social problems (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Lot 5376 G)

their many conversations that week, Daniels emphasized to Wallace the historic commonalities between the American South and rural Mexico, just as he had done with John Ferrell and Frank Tannenbaum in earlier years. These conversations deeply impacted Wallace's understanding of how Mexico might raise its rural standard of living. Reporting on the trip to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Wallace insisted that for "eighty percent of the Mexican people," "one of the greatest needs is a hard headed, soft hearted [Farm] Security Administration" to provide cheap credit to farmers. Wallace was convinced that "production under the *ejidal* system would eventually be greater than under the hacienda system," but in 1940, "the average *ejidatario* produces with his present technology less than the average share cropper in the South." American assistance, Wallace believed, might be the key to solving this dilemma. "One of the great

foundations in the United States,” he told Hull while in Mexico, “could render a great service by setting up a rather small experiment station designed both to discover and demonstrate more efficient methods of growing corn and beans.”⁶³

Yet upon returning to Washington in January 1941, Wallace did not further pursue his suggestions toward a program of U.S. agricultural assistance. It would instead be Josephus Daniels who took the lead in resuming the push for the Rockefeller Foundation’s participation in Mexican agriculture. In early January, Daniels returned home to North Carolina, to see his family in Raleigh. At the very same time, John Ferrell was also visiting that city, to attend a Farm Security Administration conference on rural nutrition in the South. Encouraged by his discussions with Wallace, Daniels contacted Ferrell and the two men convened at Daniels’ home in Raleigh on January 12. As he had done earlier, Daniels insisted to Ferrell that Mexican “progress will be hastened by an adaptation to Mexican conditions of the activities of the Rockefeller Foundation boards in our southern states with respect to health, education, and agriculture.” In pushing for such a program, Daniels eagerly told Ferrell, they had a new and well-placed ally in Henry Wallace. After recounting his conversations with Wallace in Mexico and the Vice President-elect’s sympathies, Daniels urged Ferrell to go and see Wallace in Washington, and do his best to bring RF President Raymond Fosdick along.⁶⁴

Ferrell left Raleigh convinced of the momentous nature of the task, and first sought an audience with the Vice President-to-be. Through his cooperation with the New Deal USDA on various southern nutrition programs, Ferrell had met M.L. Wilson, then the director of the Extension Service and a close observer of Mexican agrarian politics

⁶³ Henry A. Wallace to Cordell Hull, December 16, 1940, Henry A. Wallace papers, University of Iowa microfilm, Reel 22, accessed at LoC.

⁶⁴ John Ferrell to George Payne, January 21, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

(see Chapter Three). Upon returning to Foundation headquarters in New York, Ferrell wrote to Wilson in hopes of getting in touch with Wallace, Wilson's former boss and close confidante. "Mr. Daniels and I," Ferrell told Wilson on January 17, "have been eager to have activities, such as the Extension and Farm Security Administration type of work, adapted to Mexican conditions and there applied." Because of the presidential inauguration on January 20, however, Ferrell would have to wait somewhat longer for an audience with Wallace.⁶⁵

In the meantime, Ferrell sought to convince Fosdick of the renewed importance of expanding the Foundation's presence in Mexico. In the last weeks of January, Ferrell composed a long, formal memorandum titled "Aid to Mexico," a crucial document that would ultimately serve as the seed for the Green Revolution. First, Ferrell argued that "the masses have been exploited by interests both within and without Mexico," and that the inequalities of race and class were the "major problems of Mexico." To him and Daniels, "who for decades have been in close touch with the Southern states and their problems," it was obvious that "the Mexican situation is similar to that which confronted the South following the war between the states." As "the Rockefeller boards have aided substantially in the South over a period of forty years in three major fields" – education, agriculture, and public health – and "the South's progress has been greatly accelerated by these stimuli," Ferrell believed a similar task could be performed in Mexico. That country "would probably welcome an extension of this aid to include an adaptation of the General Education Board's Southern agricultural program."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ John Ferrell to M.L. Wilson, January 17, 1941, GEBCP, Series 1, Subseries 2, Box 273, Folder 2842, RAC.

⁶⁶ John Ferrell, "Aid to Mexico: Memorandum from John Ferrell to Raymond Fosdick," January 27, 1941, RFA, RG 2, 1941 Stacks, Series 323, Box 561, Folder 3814, RAC.

Yet Ferrell acknowledged that Mexico was neither a *tabula rasa* without history nor a mirror image of the *fin-de-siècle* South. It was not a place of stasis, but of recent transformations. First, he declared that the *ejido* and the *ejidal* schools were an important first step toward ending rural poverty in Mexico. They were “soundly conceived and as good as could be provided in dealing with Mexican conditions,” and a Foundation program should build upon rather than work against them. Astonishingly, the evidence he provided for this claim was drawn from Clarence Senior’s comparative book on the Comarca Lagunera and the American South, *Democracy Comes to a Cotton Kingdom* (see Chapter Three), which Ferrell attached to the report. But just as importantly, Ferrell argued that Seaman Knapp’s demonstration program was not the only southern model that might be applicable in Mexico. As he had earlier noted to M.L. Wilson, Ferrell argued that the “type of assistance given by the Farm Security Administration in the United States to low-income families in agricultural communities” might also “be adapted to Mexican conditions.” Just as southern sharecroppers had, Mexican *campesinos* would also benefit from “small loans” and “aid and supervision by farm agents and home economists.” In both nations, therefore, “there is a precedent for government aid to the poor agricultural families.” The rural New Deal thus figured importantly in Ferrell’s consideration of a Mexican aid program.⁶⁷

Ferrell submitted this memorandum to Fosdick on January 27, explaining that it had grown from discussions between him and Daniels in North Carolina. He pressured Fosdick to meet with Wallace to discuss a possible agricultural program, and then plan to visit Mexico himself in the coming months.⁶⁸ Ferrell was anxious to begin talks with the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ John A. Ferrell to Raymond Fosdick, January 27, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

Mexican government as soon as possible, for two reasons. First, he believed that Avila Camacho, more so than Cárdenas, was amenable to cooperation with the United States. Second, he was worried that Daniels might retire soon and that the Ambassador's hand in the matter would be essential.⁶⁹ With Wallace now part of the equation, Fosdick was swayed by Ferrell's plea for immediate action in Mexico. On January 29, he wrote to Wallace and asked for an opportunity to meet in Washington, which the Vice President arranged for the following week.⁷⁰

On the afternoon of February 3, 1941, Wallace, Fosdick, and Ferrell sat down together in Washington to discuss the problems of Mexican rural poverty and its possible solutions. Fosdick first explained the Foundation's earlier program in public health, and their desire to expand it into agriculture. Wallace presented the dilemma as he understood it: the low standard of living, Mexico's greatest challenge, could best be raised by an improvement in the cultivation of corn and beans, the staples of the national diet. He believed that such an improvement could be facilitated by "demonstrations of efficient agricultural practices...located on the plateau where the population is dense." Ferrell and Fosdick added that perhaps "aid to small farmers along the line of the subsistence homestead projects and the Farm Security Administration in the United States" might also be of use. Wallace responded that the Mexican government was already engineering similar campaigns, and that focusing on plant material and agricultural practices would be most useful. In addition, Wallace advocated for studies of nutrition and the possible shortcomings of the Mexican diet. He also warned Ferrell and Fosdick that the

⁶⁹ John A. Ferrell to George Payne, January 28, 1941, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 63, RAC.

⁷⁰ Raymond Fosdick to Henry A. Wallace, January 29, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

Rockefeller name in Mexico might be linked in the popular memory with “the oil industry, expropriated property, and the attendant controversies.”⁷¹

In the meeting, Wallace was supportive of Fosdick and Ferrell’s plans for an agricultural program, but in his diary he expressed some skepticism of the Foundation’s vision. Particularly, he believed that if Rockefeller agents accompanied their agricultural campaign with intensive public health work, as they had already done in Mexico, the two might cancel each other out. “It would be a crime,” Wallace wrote in his diary, “to make another Puerto Rico out of Mexico with population crowding on the means of subsistence.”⁷² Likewise, when Wallace wrote Marte Gómez in early March to tell the Mexican agriculture minister of his meeting with the Foundation officials – the first that Gómez would have heard of the Rockefeller Foundation’s interest in agriculture – he warned that “if [a Rockefeller program] reduced mortality rates in Mexico without a corresponding increase in food production, the result could lead to very harmful consequences for the country.”⁷³

Wallace was not the only budding critic of the Foundation’s emerging plan to work in Mexican agriculture. Upon learning of the meeting between Ferrell, Fosdick, and Wallace, Joseph Willits, the RF’s chief for social science research, asked the advice of his friend Carl Sauer, the University of California geographer who had a long experience with the American Southwest and Mexico. Sauer’s response was fiercely skeptical of the project, and is often recalled by scholars of the Green Revolution:

⁷¹ Direct quotations are from John Ferrell, “Notes on Conference with Vice President Wallace, RBF, and JAF regarding Mexico – its Problems and Remedies,” February 3, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC; see also Raymond Fosdick memorandum on conference with Henry A. Wallace, February 3, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 11, Folder 70, RAC.

⁷² Wallace, *The Reminiscences of Henry Agard Wallace*, 1290-1292.

⁷³ Henry Wallace to Marte R. Gómez, March 7, 1941, Cartas, 1941, Q-Z, AMRG.

Mexican agriculture cannot be pointed toward standardization on a few commercial types without upsetting native economy and culture hopelessly. The example of Iowa is about the most dangerous of all for Mexico. Unless the Americans understand that, they'd better keep out of this country entirely... This thing must be approached from an appreciation of the native economies as being basically sound.⁷⁴

While Sauer's warning contained undeniable wisdom, he nevertheless misconstrued the purpose and origins of the Foundation's prospective program. First, his characterization of sound "native economies" conjures the illusion of a timeless and unchanging rural Mexico. In fact, the rural Mexico of 1941 was in turmoil as the *ejido* was under siege as a potential model for agricultural development. Likewise, his critique of the American Midwest as an inappropriate model for Mexico reveals his lack of knowledge about the Foundation program's origins, and his insensitivity to U.S. regionalism. Not surprisingly, Ferrell was the first to respond to Sauer's criticism. "Neither the exact program that the General Education Board found satisfactory for the Southern States nor that which has been suitable for Iowa can be superimposed on Mexico," Ferrell wrote in an inter-department office memo. But "in the Southern States," he reminded his colleagues, "the development of sound agricultural practices was undertaken as the best method of combating poverty," and the same might be true in Mexico. Iowa did not share the conflicted and stratified histories of the South and Mexico, Ferrell implied, and thus made little sense as a model.⁷⁵

Officers of the Foundation met to formally consider a Mexican agricultural program on February 18, 1941. Gathered at the New York office was a diverse crowd that represented the Rockefeller philanthropies' diverse interests. Alongside Ferrell,

⁷⁴ "Comments by Professor Carl Sauer," February 10, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

⁷⁵ John A. Ferrell to Raymond Fosdick, February 13, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

Fosdick, and the Social Science division's Joseph Willits was Albert Mann, Vice President of the General Education Board and director of its New Southern Program. Mann, in the words of one colleague, was "the only person on the 55th floor...who really knew anything about agriculture," and thus a predictable choice in leading the program.⁷⁶ Also present was the scientific wing, represented by Frank Blair Hanson and Harry Miller, both biologists who worked in the RF's Natural Sciences division. Fosdick opened the meeting by emphasizing the need "for specialists and demonstrations such as the G.E.B. did in our South twenty years ago," aimed toward making "a contribution to the standard of living." As the Foundation was being forced to withdraw from war-torn Europe and Asia, Fosdick foresaw Latin America as a potential outlet for their work. Before the audience, Albert Mann then described his enthusiasm for the project, though he recommended that they would "have to look more broadly than Wallace has suggested," considering Mexico's "diversities of soil, climate, elevation." Mann emphasized that the "demonstration of existing knowledge" might prove the most effective approach. Likely remembering the Knapp campaigns, Mann suggested demonstrating "simple method[s] of selection of seed stocks" and "comparative variety trials which do not require any extension of basic research." By the meeting's end, the planners had reached few conclusions about the shape of a prospective program, but they did adopt two resolutions. First, the program would be under the responsibility of the Natural Sciences division and led by Frank Hanson. Secondly, Hanson and Mann would together write a memorandum about an "agricultural approach to Mexico."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Harry M. Miller oral history, interviewed by William C. Cobb, May 1967, 16, RFA, RG 13, Box 19, RAC.

⁷⁷ Staff conference on Mexican program, February 18, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box , Folder 2, RAC.

In the coming weeks, Mann began reading on Mexico's history and society in preparation for writing the memorandum, as he admitted he knew little about it before the February meeting. Ultimately, because Hanson was tied up with other duties, Mann ended up composing that memorandum on his own. That document evidenced that Mann was relying heavily on his experience with rural problems in the American South, along with his willingness to look to the New Deal for models. The RF campaign to improve Mexican agriculture, Mann argued, should rely on a two-pronged strategy. First was the "strengthening of basic scientific foundations" in the training of Mexican scientists in the basic agricultural sciences, such as soil chemistry and biology, plant breeding and genetics, and plant pathology. However, this "long-time procedure" should be accompanied with a more immediate campaign toward the "more effective utilization of established knowledge of improved farm practices through demonstrations, as exemplified by such agencies as agricultural extension services and the Farm Security Administration in the United States." Both campaigns, insisted Mann, "must be indigenous and arise out of native abilities, native plant and animal stocks, and the cultural characteristics of the people." As a first step, Mann recommended that the Foundation send two men down to Mexico for a preliminary survey. The first should be a plant scientist, but the second ought to be more socially oriented, familiar with the "organization of agricultural education, research, and extension teaching and with special undertakings of the Farm Security Administration type." This balance was crucial to Mann's formulation of a program.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Albert R. Mann, "Approach to a Possible Natural Science Program in Mexico with Special Reference to Agriculture," February 20, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 11, Folder 70, RAC.

Mann's emphasis on education, culture, and social problems was not equally shared by Frank Hanson, who decided to send to Mexico only one man: his Natural Science colleague Harry Miller. Miller was a zoologist who had taught in the Midwest before he had joined the Rockefeller Foundation in 1932. In early March of 1941, he traveled down to Mexico, with the goal of meeting with government officials to assay their eagerness to participate with the RF, and to inspect and report on agricultural practices in the center of Mexico. He made initial contact with the new officials of the Agriculture Secretariat, meeting with Marte Gómez and his assistant Alfonso González Gallardo, who both expressed their interest in a cooperative project. Touring the countryside, Miller observed a wide variety of farms. He spoke little Spanish, and thus gravitated toward landlords who spoke English, who in turn were eager to discuss their gripes with current agricultural and land policies. Their opinions would deeply influence Miller's observations.⁷⁹

In Guadalajara, Miller also met with the geographer Carl Sauer, who had sought Miller out to discuss the Foundation's planned program. Sauer furthered his earlier critique of agricultural interventions, but in terms quite different from those recalled by scholars who seek to celebrate Sauer as a visionary dissenter. Having learned that the project was actively looking toward New Deal agrarian programs as models, Sauer admitted that "my back is up because the Viceroy [Henry A. Wallace] has expressed his pleasure." Under Wallace, argued Sauer, the "USDA has developed an aggressive political philosophy with regard to agriculture," and their pushing the RF in a similar direction "looks like an extension of that philosophy of the good life to our Latin neighbors." While he admitted that he sympathized with "a fair share of their program,"

⁷⁹ Harry Miller Mexican log, March 2-21, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

Sauer advised that the USDA, and the Farm Security Administration under it, was “primarily a political organization today.” If the USDA was “taking steps for a penetration” of Latin America, “let it do so if it wishes, rather than a foundation.” Sauer’s observations, surprisingly critical of the social emphasis of the emerging Foundation program, underscored the importance of New Deal models to its planners.⁸⁰

Upon returning to New York, Miller briefed the Foundation on his travels and understandings of rural Mexico and its agriculture. Dramatically departing from Mann, Ferrell, and Fosdick’s sensitivity to Mexican history and the country’s environmental and social diversity, Miller’s report was disdainful and dismissive of the Revolution, indigenous people, and recent attempts to overcome rural poverty in the nation. Mexican agriculture, he claimed, “is in the hands of the Indian,” mistakenly lumping together the non-Spanish-speaking indigenous minority with the *mestizo* class that made up most of the nation’s farmers. Miller believed that any attempt to improve agricultural practice would depend on the adoption of new methods by “the ignorant, suspicious, and generally uncooperative and uninterested Indian farmer who is steeped in tradition and frequently in alcohol.” He blamed the Cárdenas regime for “pauper[izing] the Indian” and the project of land reform for its “harmful influence on [the Indian’s] already bad psychology.” Because of these perceived obstacles, Miller counseled that rather than embark on a large demonstration campaign in Mexico, the RF should solely grant fellowships to train aspiring Mexican scientists at U.S. agricultural colleges.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Sauer sums up his discussion with Miller in a letter to Joseph Willits, March 12, 1941, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 63, RAC.

⁸¹ Harry Miller, “Mexican Log: Aspects of Agriculture in Mexico,” March 28, 1941, RFA, RG 6.13, Series 1.1, Box 33, Folder 366, RAC.

Miller's disdain for indigenous people and redistributive Mexican politics may seem a testament to the Foundation's total ignorance of local Mexican context or unwillingness to engage in questions of social inequality. Yet Miller was not representative of the Foundation leadership that was pushing for an agricultural program, and his colleagues challenged his observations. Ferrell himself had returned to visit Mexico in early April 1941, at Josephus Daniels' urging, and discussed the Foundation's plans with his old friend. Spending time with Daniels and traveling through rural Mexico further convinced Ferrell that "practical, simple demonstrations along elementary lines," not just fellowships for scientists, was the solution that would "hasten a better day for the Mexicans." If scientists were unable to explain agricultural techniques "in simple terms which the poor farmers in remote communities can understand," they would be doing little good for the nation.⁸²

Ultimately President Fosdick, Mann, and even Frank Hanson were not satisfied with the summary of Mexican conditions that Miller presented them. His report was too skewed and too conservative in its recommendations for a future program. Fosdick was convinced that a more dramatic entry into Mexican agriculture was warranted, and during the summer of 1941, the Foundation organized a team of three scientists to serve as an agricultural Survey Commission in Mexico. Those men would play a crucial role in forging the Green Revolution model and their careers in agricultural development would stretch into the 1960s. The final section of this chapter will explore their Mexican trip during the summer of 1941 and its role in forging the Mexican Agricultural Program that began in early 1943.

⁸² John A. Ferrell, "Report by JAF on his Visit to Mexico," March 14 – April 13, 1941, RFA, RG 2, 1941 Stacks, Series 323, Box 561, Folder 3814, RAC. On Daniels and Ferrell's April 1941 meeting in Mexico City, see Daniels diary, April 7, 1941, Diaries, Reel 7, Daniels papers, LoC.

The Survey Commission and the Birth of the Mexican Agricultural Program

In April of 1941, when Harry Miller submitted his travel report, the Rockefeller Foundation's interest in Mexican agriculture was barely two months old. There was little coherence among the myriad plans suggested for a future program, but Josephus Daniels and John Ferrell's push from below had convinced Raymond Fosdick that the time was ripe for an extensive intervention in the social, economic, and technological fabric of rural Mexico. It should be guided by a "complex and sober" analysis of Mexico's agriculture, believed Fosdick, "no simple or hurried inspection" but extended personal observations by a team of professionals.⁸³ Miller's hasty report, it was clear, was insufficient, and Fosdick instead proposed an extended survey of Mexican agriculture that would seriously assess the potential of American assistance to farmers.

Mann, Frank Hanson, and Harry Miller sat down together in New York in early April, tasked by Fosdick to organize what was now dubbed the Rockefeller Survey Commission. Of crucial importance, of course, was who would be selected for that team. The decision process was not an easy one, and the three men's contrasting views on agriculture and rural life did not facilitate consensus. Ultimately, they agreed that the survey required experts in three distinct fields. First came corn breeding, of obvious significance to Mexico. Mann insisted that "Mexican soil studies would be of fundamental importance," and the team agreed to select a soil scientist. Lastly, Miller highlighted crop disease as a major challenge to Mexican agriculture, and suggested plant pathology as the third specialization. Despite Miller's remembering that he and Hanson "lean[ed] very heavily" on Mann for guidance in selecting the survey team, Mann broke

⁸³ Raymond Fosdick, "Foreword," in E.C. Stakman, Richard Bradfield, and Paul Mangelsdorf, *Campaigns Against Hunger* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), vii.

with his earlier emphasis that a social scientist or agricultural economist be part of any study of Mexico, though it is uncertain from the archival record why he changed his mind.⁸⁴

The three men that Mann, Hanson, and Miller chose reflected the American discipline of agricultural science at a moment of great transition. Each of them had received their professional training during the 1910s or 1920s, before the technological revolutions in plant genetics, pesticides, and fertilizer of the 1930s and wartime years. Unlike the mainstream of U.S. agricultural science a generation later, they weighed emerging chemical- and capital- intensive approaches to agriculture with the more labor-intensive approaches of an earlier generation. The most senior member was Elvin C. Stakman, the team's plant pathologist, who was then teaching at the University of Minnesota. Stakman specialized in wheat, and had worked on the eradication of wheat pests for several decades. He was the only member of the team who had some experience in Mexico, where he had worked under the USDA in the control of wheat rust during the 1920s and 1930s. Paul Mangelsdorf, of Harvard University, was chosen as the Survey Commission's corn breeder. Before taking a position with Harvard's botany department, he had worked in East Texas with research on corn varieties appropriate to small-scale farmers, which had caught the attention of Albert Mann.⁸⁵ Lastly, Richard Bradfield, a professor at Cornell University and a close colleague of Mann's, specialized in soil science. Bradfield had spent much of his career working with both synthetic and organic fertilizers, analyzing their benefits for farmers of different economic positions.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 36-37. The debates over the naming of the Survey Commission are not well documented, and Miller's oral history is the best source, despite being written more than twenty-five years later.

⁸⁵ On Mann's role in selecting Mangelsdorf, see Paul Mangelsdorf oral history, interviewed by William C. Cobb, 1966, pg. 45, RFA, RG 13, RAC.

Offering the recruits sizeable honoraria and the opportunity for unrestricted travel, Fosdick and his Foundation allies had no trouble in securing the assistance of the three men. In early June of 1941, the three members of the Survey Commission met at the Rockefeller Foundation's offices in New York, to be briefed before departing for Mexico. Fosdick, Hanson, Ferrell, and Mann explained to them the Foundation's goals in their study of Mexican agriculture. They detailed the origins of the program, highlighting the contributions of Wallace and Ferrell and the earlier experiences of the General Education Board, and recommended that the three scientists meet with Josephus Daniels upon their arrival to Mexico City. Hanson emphasized that a future program in Mexico planned to operate on two levels. The first was "the practical level," concerned "with the farmer, who is, for the most part, the Indian in Mexico," and the second focusing on the bolstering of national scientific research. At its core, the three scientists were told, they hoped to create a humanitarian program promoting "the health of the Mexican people through nutrition and improved economic conditions," not detached scholarly exploration.⁸⁶

In a green station wagon purchased by the Foundation, Richard Bradfield and Paul Mangelsdorf drove from New York southwestward in late June 1941, crossing the Mexican border at Laredo in early July. Elvin Stakman, who already had extensive experience with the border region, planned to meet his colleagues in central Mexico. Just south of the border, in nearby Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, Bradfield and Mangelsdorf were joined by Eduardo Morillo Safa, the chief of the Secretariat of Agriculture's planning department and the Foundation's closest contact in the Mexican government.

⁸⁶ "Meeting of the Mexican Agricultural Commission," June 5, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 11, Folder 71, RAC.

Morillo Safa urged that the group attend the inauguration of an *ejido* in Ciudad Victoria to get a first-hand impression of the land reform project. Despite his inability to understand the ceremony, Bradfield “got enough out of it to be impressed,” and he would remember the event for many years. They reunited with Stakman in Mexico City, where they also met with Marte Gómez and his undersecretaries, who assured them of Mexican official interest in a cooperative program. But unlike Miller before them, the survey team was not content with remaining in Mexico City and its outskirts. Over the next two and a half months, the team criss-crossed sixteen Mexican states, surveying wildly diverse



Figure 4.7. The Rockefeller Foundation Survey Commission team on horseback, Mexico, 1941. The team often eschewed the comfort of paved roads to travel into more remote rural locations in central Mexico. Picture here are Bradfield, Stakman, Richard Schultes (a graduate fellow accompanying the team), and Mangelsdorf during the summer of 1941, location unknown (RFA, Photographs, Series 323, Box 95, Folder 1874, RAC)

agricultural zones and meeting with farmers both wealthy and poor. From *ejidatarios* they heard of the possibilities of small-scale farming and the redemptive nature of land redistribution. From large landowners, however, they listened to stories of peons unable to take responsibility of their farms and lives, “absolutely lost” without the guidance of their former patrons. Covering nearly five thousand miles over the course of their visit, the Survey Commission’s travels revealed a divided and stratified Mexico at a moment of transition and unrest.⁸⁷

Considering the diversity of their encounters and experiences within the country, the team’s interpretations were hardly foreordained. Yet in their report to the Rockefeller Foundation that followed their return to the United States in September 1941, the Survey Commission drew very different conclusions than Miller had reached in his earlier report. First of all, they asserted that the “time is ripe” for a broad program of agricultural intervention. Particularly in contrast with Miller was their understanding of rural Mexico, which was deeply sympathetic to the Mexican Revolution’s agrarian program and suggested the *ejido* as the base unit of the Foundation’s future program. “There are some who assert that the relatively low status of agricultural productivity in Mexico is the fault of the *ejidal* system,” observed the three writers, “and that improvement cannot be brought about as long as it exists.” Among the large landholders they had met with, this was a ubiquitous observation. But the survey team believed that “the first part of the assertion certainly is oversimplification and the second part is very probably not true.” The main problem of Mexican agriculture, they claimed, was not its social organization in the post-Cárdenas era but its lack of effective techniques of cultivation. “If the

⁸⁷ Richard Bradfield oral history, interviewed by William Cobb, 1966, RFA, RG 13, Box 15, RAC. Bradfield’s account offers the richest detail into the many interactions the survey team had with Mexican farmers.

Mexicans were to be reproached, it would have to be for attempting to render too much social service with insufficient scientific basis,” Stakman, Mangelsdorf, and Bradfield insisted. Mexican reformers’ “social zeal,” therefore, “should not be curbed but their scientific zeal must be increased.” In developing a package of scientific techniques appropriate to the *ejidatarios*, the Survey Commission hoped to strengthen the position of small-holders across Mexico.⁸⁸

How would they achieve this? The survey team’s plan for improving peasant cultivation techniques was oriented toward the twin crops of corn and beans, and was surprisingly sensitive to the structural limitations that most such farmers faced. In emphasizing food crops for domestic consumption, rather than commercial exports, the survey team broke dramatically with earlier American efforts to “develop” Mexican agriculture. Rather than pursue an independent program, the three scientists recommended that the Foundation work directly with the Mexican secretariat of agriculture. They suggested three concrete strategies toward improving food crop cultivation, in order of their importance: improvement of the soil, the introduction of new plant varieties, and the management of diseases and pests. Yet in discussing maize, the primary food plant targeted, the survey team was rather skeptical of the promises of hybridized corn seed, a political technology that will be examined in far greater depth in the following chapter. Such seed, they argued, “must be purchased anew each year, and the small farmer in Mexico has neither the cash nor the initiative to do so.” If hybrid corn was ever to make an impact among common farmers, they claimed, it had to be distributed by the *ejidal* banks to smallholders without the interference of commercial

⁸⁸ Elvin Stakman, Paul Mangelsdorf, and Richard Bradfield, “Agricultural Conditions and Problems in Mexico: Report of the Survey Commission of the Rockefeller Foundation,” August/September 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

seed companies. But the three scientists' sensitivity to social and economic inequalities also had its limits. They diagnosed the poverty of Mexico's soils as a major obstacle to rural welfare, but in the same breath that they advocated the planting of green manures and crop rotation as a remedy, they emphasized the importance of synthetic, commercial fertilizers, which were beyond the reach of most Mexican farmers.⁸⁹

The survey team's report, despite its incoherence on questions of social impact and its inability to explain how new techniques would be directly transmitted to farmers, did provide the Rockefeller Foundation with a clearer definition of what a future program in agriculture would look like. Raymond Fosdick told Stakman that it was "precisely the kind of document we were looking for," and was certain to give "a substantial basis" for beginning negotiations with the Mexican government.⁹⁰ Yet before Fosdick presented their plans before the RF's Board of Trustees in pursuit of final approval to begin program negotiations, he made an appointment to speak with Henry Wallace in Washington, hoping to discuss the survey team's report. On October 29, 1941, the two men sat down to discuss the report, and Fosdick observed that Wallace seemed "immensely pleased" with the product. Yet Wallace also had his critiques. Particularly, he picked up on the report's lack of clarity as to how the extension of scientific methods would function. Noting the "from the top down" emphasis of the report, Wallace "hoped that it did not mean that no demonstration work would be undertaken." The survey team's diagnosis had strayed somewhat from the Seaman Knapp model that had

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Raymond Fosdick to Elvin Stakman, October 21, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 11, Folder 72, RAC.

motivated Ferrell, Daniels, and Fosdick in the early months, and Wallace believed its absence was significant.⁹¹

The tension between research and demonstration represented the differing visions of the program's early advocates – mainly from the philanthropies' southern wing – versus the research scientists who had written the survey report. However, that unresolved conflict would be postponed for later, as Fosdick moved quickly toward formalizing the Foundation's entry into Mexican agriculture without forcing revisions of the report. On December 3, 1941, Frank Hanson of the Natural Sciences division and Albert Mann of the GEB's New Southern Program presented the Survey Commission's report before the RF's board of trustees, laying it out as a roadmap for the founding of a program in Mexico.⁹² It was approved, and the Foundation planners set their sights on the administrative details of their future program.

First, Fosdick converted the Survey Commission team of Stakman, Mangelsdorf, and Bradfield into a permanent agricultural Advisory Committee, who would remain at their academic jobs but offer policy suggestions. The three men would hold those advisory positions into the 1960s. Secondly, Fosdick sought a local director who would be in residence in Mexico to organize a research and extension program and oversee its daily administration. He first asked Stakman to assume this role, but the latter turned down the request after several months of indecision, citing prior commitments at Minnesota. Stakman, however, recommended J. George Harrar for the post, a young plant pathologist who was then working at Washington State College and had been

⁹¹ Raymond Fosdick to John Ferrell, Albert Mann, et. al., October 31, 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 11, Folder 72, RAC.

⁹² "Recommendations of the Commission to Survey Agriculture in Mexico," December 3, 1941, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 63, RAC.

trained by Stakman at Minnesota. While perhaps not the most decorated scientist, Harrar was attractive to the Foundation team for a number of reasons. First of all, he had taught agriculture in Puerto Rico during the 1920s before beginning his graduate work, was fluent in Spanish, and had experience working in Latin America. Secondly, Harrar also had experience in the southern United States, as he had worked at Virginia Polytechnic Institute from 1935 to 1941, which likely pleased the southern wing of the Foundation planners. Perhaps most importantly, though, was that Harrar was committed to living in Mexico, was willing to start immediately, and planned to stay with the job for some time. In July of 1942, the Advisory Committee met with Fosdick, Hanson, and Mann and recommended offering the position to Harrar with a generous salary of \$6,000 a year. Harrar quickly accepted.⁹³

Only with Harrar selected as director and with program administration finalized did the Foundation begin formal negotiations with the Avila Camacho government. Mexican Secretary of Agriculture Marte Gómez had been keenly aware of the Foundation's interest for some time, through his discussion with Josephus Daniels, Henry Wallace, and members of the survey team, but it was only in late September of 1942 that Gómez approached Avila Camacho about the Americans' plans. In describing the project to the President, Gómez rightly connected the Foundation's interest in Mexico to earlier experiences in U.S. regional development, specifically citing the work of the General Education Board. "Originally," wrote Gómez to Avila Camacho, the philanthropies "only directed their efforts to improve the conditions of life of the rural population of the Southern States of the American Union," where they "pushed for agricultural education

⁹³ "Stenographic Report: Meeting of the Advisory Committee for Mexican Agriculture," July 28, 1942, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 67, RAC.

and were the ones who brought extension work to its apogee.” Gómez too praised the “caution and scientific rigor” of the Foundation. However, he did warn that their seemingly altruistic global programs were often designed “for the benefit of the U.S. government,” which “acquires very valuable information about the political, economic and social structures of all the nations in which the group operates.” Nevertheless, he counseled the President to welcome the group’s participation, as it promised to advance their common goal of bringing science to small Mexican farmers.⁹⁴

During the late months of 1942, Gómez and his lieutenant Eduardo Morillo Safa haggled with the Foundation leadership over what the cooperative program would look like on the ground. Gómez agreed that Foundation scientists could formally affiliate with the Secretariat of Agriculture and Development, and he would secure them laboratory and office space along with test plots on the grounds of the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo in the state of México, about thirty miles from central Mexico City. Beyond that, however, little was decided about the nature of cooperation or the research agenda. Nevertheless, on October 17, 1942, Gómez sent the Mexican government’s formal invitation to the Rockefeller Foundation, welcoming collaboration “with great enthusiasm” and certain that “contact with the distinguished authorities that the Foundation will commission” would be greatly beneficial to Mexican agronomists. More than a year and a half since Wallace’s Mexican visit, and seven years after the push for a Rockefeller Foundation program in agriculture had begun, it was made a reality.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Marte R. Gómez, “Memorandum para el Señor Presidente de la República sobre el funcionamiento de la Fundación Rockefeller y enumeración de las actividades que desearía realizar en México en materia de producción agrícola,” September 21, 1942, Documentos Oficiales, 1942, Vol. II, AMRG.

⁹⁵ Marte R. Gómez to Raymond Fosdick, October 17, 1942, Documentos Oficiales, 1942, Vol. II, AMRG. Translation is Gómez’s.

Beneath its grandiose rhetoric and promises, however, the Foundation project now dubbed the Mexican Agricultural Program was little more than a hollow shell. With a first-year budget of \$30,000, only one full-time employee in George Harrar, and three part-time advisers, the program had a rather inauspicious beginning. Foundation planners recognized that theirs was a risky venture, and as Harrar planned his move to Mexico City during the winter of 1942-43, he undoubtedly did so in an atmosphere of uncertainty and doubt. They agreed that Stakman would accompany Harrar down to Mexico City and stay with him for the first three months of the program, helping to negotiate details with Gómez and devise an agenda for research and extension. On February 1, Stakman and Harrar began their journey down, uncertain of how they would be received and how their experiment would begin. Neither could have anticipated the consequences of that trip.

Even before entering Mexico in 1943, the leadership of the Rockefeller Foundation had reached little in the way of consensus over the future of their attempt to remake Mexican agricultural practices. The earliest proponents of Foundation aid to Mexican farmers, particularly Josephus Daniels and John Ferrell, relied explicitly on the earthy demonstration formula that Seaman Knapp had pioneered in the American South a generation earlier, and shied from an intensive research program. Albert Mann and Raymond Fosdick, in the wake of the New Southern Program's rededication to regional problems, filtered their memories of the Knapp campaigns through more recent diagnoses of rural inequality. Particularly, Howard Odum's regionalism and the Farm Security Administration's provision of land and credit loomed large in their imagination as they considered an intervention in Mexican agriculture. After 1941, the techno-scientific

approach of Henry Wallace, Frank Hanson, and Harry Miller joined this cacophony of voices. Papering over the differences in these many strategies had been essential to achieving enough support to begin planning the Mexican Agricultural Program. Underneath the surface, however, the leadership of the Foundation was deeply undecided about their goals and strategies. These fractures would become abundantly clear as the program was put into action.

When Harrar and Stakman arrived to Mexico City and formally began their partnership with the Mexican government in February of 1943, their already conflicted program was tossed into the political maelstrom of post-Cardenista Mexican politics. No issue was more divisive in that era than the future of Mexican agriculture, especially as critics and supporters of the land redistribution project battled for public and political support. The question of agricultural productivity, rather than a dry academic concern, was inextricably bound to the social organization of the Mexican countryside in the post-revolutionary era. Negotiating these political dilemmas would dramatically transform the Rockefeller program and push it in unexpected directions. The following chapter will examine the first years of the Mexican Agricultural program and its context in that nation's political discourse, revealing how scientists' memories of the American South continued to impact their understanding of rural poverty and its possible solutions.

CHAPTER 5

ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENTS: APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE EARLY MEXICAN AGRICULTURAL PROGRAM, 1940-1945

With two generations of experience in attempting to solve the problems of rural poverty in the southern United States, the Rockefeller Foundation entered Mexico in 1943 with hopes of pursuing a similar campaign. Pushed forward by the historical and geographical comparisons of reformers like Josephus Daniels and John Ferrell, who likened the problems of 1940s Mexico to the post-Civil War American South, the Foundation sought to tailor its earlier strategies in rural development to a new national context. Yet in arriving to Mexico, Rockefeller scientists and administrators found themselves in unfamiliar territory, and their program was immediately swept up in the tempestuous currents of a Mexican political scene that was then seeking to resolve the significance and future of its Revolution. This chapter and the next trace how Rockefeller Foundation scientists employed by the Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP) and their counterparts in Mexican agronomy and politics negotiated the future of a rural development program that would ultimately impact every continent on the planet.

The chapters are bookended by two transitional moments: the succession of Manuel Avila Camacho to the Mexican presidency in 1940, and the first exportation of the Rockefeller Mexican project, to Colombia, in 1950. During the ten years that lay in between, Mexican and American agronomists experimented with a wide array of solutions aimed at reversing rural poverty, wrestling with questions of technology,

democracy, and inequality. While the “Green Revolution” would not be named as such for another twenty years, it would be in the Mexican dilemmas of the 1940s, and with their unpredictable resolutions, that the future of the rural planet lay.

Among scholars of Western-led development, few recent works have been as influential as James C. Scott’s 1998 *Seeing Like a State*. Illustrating with a broad range of examples how government planners have sought to reduce the inherent complexity of human societies for the sake of legibility and measurement, Scott’s book provided a powerful analytical category – “high modernism” – which epitomized planners’ hubristic desire to engineer universal models for human progress that paid little attention to local context, whether geographical, historical, or climatic. Critical students of the Green Revolution eagerly pinned that label upon the global agricultural development campaign that peaked during the 1950s through 1970s, and have reaped significant intellectual fruits in doing so.¹

However, in describing the Green Revolution during its early Mexican career, the theoretical container of high modernism holds little water. I argue in this chapter that the developmental strategies employed by the Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico began as an antithesis to high modernism, in large part because of the Foundation’s experience with small farmers’ social and economic limitations in the American South, and their internalization of the rhetoric and ideals of the Mexican agrarian revolution. Indeed, sociologist Jess Gilbert’s concept of “low modernism” may better describe the early Rockefeller program, in its wedding of expert-led rural planning and recognition of local

¹ See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), especially Chapter 8 on agriculture and environment.

traditions, social divisions, and non-commercial mentalities.² In stark contrast to later iterations of the Green Revolution, the Mexican program from 1943 to the last years of that decade was surprisingly well-tailored to the actual needs of *ejido* farmers, who represented the primary group targeted by the Foundation. MAP planners acknowledged the potential dangers of rapidly commercializing the agricultural economy and introducing technologies that were unsuited for the rural majority. As such, the Rockefeller program marked a powerful alternative within the history of postwar development, yet its social sensitivities were relatively short-lived. Prompted by frustrations in reaching Mexican farmers and the increasing temptation to make technical assistance a key weapon of the chilling Cold War, by 1950 the Foundation's leadership had excised most of the elements from its repertoire that were tailored to social complexities and divisions, emphasizing instead a universal model unrestrained by Mexican particularities and difficulties.

In short, during the course of the Rockefeller program's first decade, its planners transitioned from understanding Mexico and the greater "Third World" as an extension of the American South, historically divided by class and race, to seeing it through the lenses of an imagined and idealized American Midwest, as a flat societal plane that was everywhere equally responsive to technical assistance. Foundation planners began the decade with a sensitive eye toward local history and the inequalities born of it, a sensitivity largely born from prior experiences in the Cotton Belt. In looking south to Mexico, they hoped not to remake that nation in the unblemished image of America's success, but from the lessons of its greatest failures. Yet they ended the decade imagining

² Jess Gilbert, "Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal," in *Fighting for the Farm: Rural America Transformed*, ed. Jane Adams (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

target societies as undifferentiated places composed of “people without history,” in anthropologist Eric Wolf’s memorable phrase, where poverty was a timeless product of tradition, backwardness, isolation, and peasant conservatism. But the cotton South provided a far more accurate metaphor for the Global South than did the North or Midwest, as historian C. Vann Woodward presciently recognized in those very years. Therefore, the sea change in the geographical imagination of the architects of development proved to be their first major misstep, and would haunt them for a generation to come. If U.S.-led rural development projects had relied upon many Americas in drafting a roadmap for global progress, rather than solely one born of an imagined Midwest, they may have avoided some of their greatest shortcomings in the postwar era.³

If interpretations of the Green Revolution’s “Americanizing” impulses have relied upon a monolithic United States, they have also commonly failed to acknowledge the importance that Mexico’s turbulent history had in shaping the Rockefeller Foundation’s early program. This shortsightedness has in part grown from the selective creation myth propagated by the Rockefeller Foundation itself: one of its chiefs declared in 1950 that it was “something of an accident” that their agricultural program began in Mexico, which

³ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Wolf’s ruminations on the West’s denial of “history” to the Rest are brought to bear upon the postwar development project most notably in James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). On the first analogy of the U.S. South as illustrative of the Global South, see C. Vann Woodward, “The Irony of Southern History,” *Journal of Southern History* 19, no. 1 (1953). I do not mean to suggest that the American Midwest has no history, as it obviously had its own divided past, but in Green Revolutionaries’ imagining of Iowa as a model for global agriculture, that history barely figured in. The Midwest was certainly a less problematic metaphor for global exportation than was the cotton South.

solely offered a “favorable location” for the Foundation to conduct an experiment.⁴ While such a memory may have served the needs of the globalizing RF in 1950, it was not faithful to the past, and I argue below that the Mexican Agricultural Program was intimately rooted in a Mexican political context. Particularly, in allying with the party of Lázaro Cárdenas, the Rockefeller Foundation took a decisive stance on the future of the revolutionary land reform project. In the scholarly literature on the Green Revolution’s global career, very few works take seriously the power of Mexican politicians and scientists in shaping the model that was later exported outwards.⁵ Yet on the flip side, neither have historians of twentieth-century Mexico fully grappled with the significance of the fact that the Green Revolution was pioneered within its borders. In a recent volume reviewing Mexican historiography, the Green Revolution received only passing mention in three essays, and none in the chapters on science or foreign relations.⁶ Assuming that the Green Revolution is only a “US and the world” story that has little to do with Mexico,

⁴ Warren Weaver to Chester Barnard, October 21, 1950, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (hereafter RFA), Record Group (hereafter RG) 1.1, Series 323, Box 3, Folder 21, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY (hereafter RAC).

⁵ The three notable exceptions are Joseph Cotter, *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880 - 2002* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), Angus Wright, *The Death of Ramón González: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), and Adolfo Olea-Franco, “One Century of Higher Agricultural Education and Research in Mexico (1850s-1960s), with a Preliminary Survey on the Same Subjects in the United States” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2001). The two best recent books on the global Green Revolution, Nick Cullather’s *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) and John H. Perkins’s *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) both discuss the early years of the MAP, but do so briefly and grant little room to delve into the national context of the Mexican Revolution’s aftermath. Other works that do even less to integrate Mexican history into the history of Green Revolution are Harry M. Cleaver, “The Origins of the Green Revolution,” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1975), Jonathan Harwood, “Peasant Friendly Plant Breeding and the Early Years of the Green Revolution in Mexico,” *Agricultural History* 83, no. 3 (2009), and Anneliese Markus de Kennedy, “The Office of Special Studies: A Study of the Joint Mexican Secretariat of Agriculture - Rockefeller Foundation Program in Agriculture, 1943-1963,” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1973).

⁶ William Beezley, ed., *A Companion to Mexican History and Culture* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). Within Mexican post-1940 historiography, the only works to take the Green Revolution seriously have been Cotter’s *Troubled Harvest*, Tanalís Padilla’s *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta, 1940 - 1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), and Enrique C. Ochoa’s *Feeding Mexico: The Political Uses of Food since 1910* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000).

these scholars have failed to consider its crucial importance to Mexican rural politics after 1940. As a result, the historiographies of the Green Revolution and twentieth-century Mexico are rarely in conversation with one another, and it is my goal in this chapter to begin bridging these two parallel but infrequently intersecting discussions.

When scholars of the Green Revolution have incorporated Mexico's national history into their interpretation of the MAP, it has not granted greater flexibility or contingency to that program, but less, due in large part to the structures of twentieth-century Mexican historiography. In conventional narratives, 1940 represents the most significant turning point since the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910. In these accounts, 1940 was the year when the Revolution "got off of its horse and into a Cadillac," as memorably expressed by journalist Carlos Denegri.⁷ That year supposedly marks the simultaneous decline of a revolutionary state dedicated to redistribution and social justice and the ascent of a regime devoted to rapid urbanization and industrialization. Implicit to this interpretation is the understanding that rural history is either unimportant to the national story that follows, or a mere declension narrative of eroding communities and the marginalization of *campesino* interests. Thus, between 1940 and the Chiapas Zapatista revolt of 1994, rural history is largely relegated to a historiographical dust bin. Yet considering the high levels of peasant organization that historians have documented for the 1930s, how can they easily assume that such militancy evaporated in the course of a few short months? In perpetuating the myth that the future of rural Mexico was set in stone by 1940, we therefore erase the complex history of conflict, negotiation, and contingency that marked the decade that followed Cárdenas' departure from the presidency, particularly during the Manuel Avila Camacho years (1940-1946). It was in

⁷ Denegri quote cited in Beezley, ed., *A Companion to Mexican History and Culture*, 453.

that turbulent political environment that the Rockefeller Foundation began its program, and its future was hardly predetermined.⁸

Likewise, interpretations of the Mexican Agricultural Program have been skewed toward emphasizing its social, economic, and environmental shortcomings because so many scholars have placed wheat, rather than corn, at center stage in their analysis. When the MAP began in 1943, it was aimed at increasing the productivity of both crops, but it would be wheat that reaped the greatest yield increases a decade later. It was therefore Mexican dwarf wheat, not improved corn, which was exported to India in the mid-1950s, and it would be the MAP's wheat breeder, Norman Borlaug, who came to represent the public face of Rockefeller agronomy at the peak of the Green Revolution. However, the ultimate triumph of wheat over corn in the Foundation's Green Revolution strategy papers over the Mexican program's early and persistent attempt to target corn, which was of far greater importance to *ejido* farmers than wheat ever would be.⁹ For the first few years of the MAP's history, wheat occupied a rather marginal position, and its transition to center stage in the Foundation's development strategy was due largely to political decisions. The MAP's early corn program, on the other hand, foreshadowed the later advent of "appropriate technologies" within the development repertoire, which would be

⁸ The most compelling arguments against the marginalization of post-1940 rural history are Padilla's *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata*, Dolores Trevizo's *Rural Protest and the Making of Democracy in Mexico, 1968-2000* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), and Alex Aviña's forthcoming work on Lucio Cabañas and rural resistance in the 1960s. Aside from them, there are very few examples of English-language scholarship that takes seriously peasant resistance and politics after 1940.

⁹ For a few works which have emphasized the MAP's wheat breeding program to prove its lack of sensitivity to social concerns, see Cullather, *The Hungry World*, Wright, *The Death of Ramón González*, Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution*, and Deborah Fitzgerald, "Exporting American Agriculture: The Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico, 1943 - 1953," *Social Studies of Science* 16, no. 3 (1986). Karin Matchett has done important work in revealing the alternative strategies of the corn program, but does trace in detail how the wheat and corn strategies battled each other for dominance, and why one ultimately proved more successful than the other. See Karin E. Matchett, "At Odds over Inbreeding: An Abandoned Attempt at Mexico/United States Collaboration to 'Improve' Mexican Corn, 1940-1950," *Journal of the History of Biology* 39, no. 2 (2006), and her dissertation "Untold Innovation: Scientific Practice and Corn Improvement in Mexico, 1935 - 1965," (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2002).

popularized during the 1970s but had deeper roots in the early and conflicted years of the development project.¹⁰ While there are a number of angles on which to evaluate the social and environmental sensitivity of any agricultural development program, I will focus primarily on the tension between corn and wheat, rather than extensively analyzing pesticide use, fertilizer application, mechanization, or extension packages.

This chapter will trace the early career of the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican Agricultural Program as part and parcel of a larger national attempt to resolve the legacy of the Mexican Revolution and its vision for the countryside. First, I examine how in the wake of Lázaro Cárdenas' far-reaching campaign to remake rural land tenure, the questions of food security and agricultural production came to define a new public debate over the future of the *ejido*. It was into this political arena that the Rockefeller Foundation entered in 1943, pledging its support to the defenders of the land reform experiment. Secondly, I explore how in the first three years of its existence, MAP scientists relied upon their experiences in the American South to construct a corn breeding program that was sensitive to the needs of poor *ejido* farmers. This chapter concludes in 1945, when the Rockefeller Foundation had formalized a program based around appropriate technologies. The following chapter reveals that in the following years, that approach weathered several crises which came to a head in 1946, a year that marked both the height of the MAP's social consciousness and the beginning of the decline of that

¹⁰ That term "appropriate technology" was popularized during the 1970s, particularly through E.F. Schumacher's influential book *Small is Beautiful* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973), which rejected high-modernist and hubristic technological planning in the wake of the oil crisis and the increasingly apparent failure of Western-led development in the "Third World." But if the word was new, the instincts behind it were not entirely so. For an examination of the political and environmental career of "appropriate technologies in the development project, see Carroll W. Pursell, "The Rise and Fall of the Appropriate Technology Movement in the United States, 1965-1985," *Technology and Culture* 34, no. 3 (1992) and Stephen Macekura, "Of Limits and Growth: Environmentalism and the Rise of Sustainable Development, 1961-1992" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, forthcoming).

strategy. Ultimately, the geopolitical demands of the escalating Cold War forced a reinvention of the Foundation's agricultural development program, and set it on a course of global expansion.

Politicizing Agricultural Production in Post-Cárdenas Mexico

By the time Lázaro Cárdenas handed the reins of presidential power to his successor Manuel Avila Camacho in December 1940, he had left an indelible footprint upon rural Mexico. In popular mythology of the time, Cárdenas had redeemed the Revolution by fulfilling the promises that had mobilized the rural revolt a generation earlier. While Cárdenas' party had been an eager participant in constructing this myth of redemption and reaped enormous political gain from its proliferation, the President's popularity was nevertheless rooted in concrete rather than imaginary achievements. More than any of his predecessors, Cárdenas had incorporated peasant voices within the machinery of his party and had fostered the sentiment among rural people that the government was responding to their needs. Cárdenas' greatest achievement, and the one that facilitated all the others, was his redistribution of nearly fifty million acres of land, the vast majority of which was organized as *ejidal* land grants to be worked by the formerly dispossessed. The Cardenista land reform project had thus transformed the *ejido* from a mere rhetorical tool in rallying *campesino* support to a visible institution in the Mexican countryside.

Yet rather than being firmly established, the *ejido* occupied a rather tenuous position in 1940, when Cárdenas left office. The whirlwind redistribution campaign of the late 1930s, waged rapidly to disorient and overwhelm its many opponents, had rarely

paused to consider the land reform's impact on agricultural production. Credit, irrigation, and machinery often failed to accompany *ejidal* grants except in the few regions that Cárdenas had sought to promote as flagships of the land reform, such as the Laguna cotton zone. The timing of land grants also rarely conformed to the natural cycles that farmers were bound to in planting and harvesting their crops, which meant that it often took several seasons for former hacienda lands to be returned to production. Without doubt, the sudden shake-up in land tenure did bring a great deal of dislocation and confusion, and Cárdenas' political opponents seized upon this trauma as they sought to discredit the *ejido* as a productive economic unit. Granted, the public debate over production, farm size, and efficiency was not unique to Mexico in this era. In the United States, a similar controversy had raged during the New Deal, and continued to a lesser degree during World War II. But in Mexico those questions were far more politically charged, because of the nation's larger proportion of rural inhabitants and the popularity of the Revolution's agrarian ideals. Rather than dry academic statistics, questions of productivity and efficiency were wound up with the smoldering legacy of a civil war that had claimed more than a million lives. I begin this chapter by exploring the political implications of agricultural productivity after Cárdenas, and how it would impact the founding of the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican Agricultural Program.

By the last years of Cárdenas' term, two opposing sides emerged to contest the future of Mexican agriculture, and their heated debate would set the parameters for agrarian politics in the Avila Camacho era. On one side were the opponents of the land reform project, made up predominantly of large landowners, the clergy, oil and mining interests, and some of the urban middle class. While this coalition had resisted land

redistribution since the Revolution had erupted, by the late 1930s they had substantially revised their oppositional rhetoric. Likely acknowledging that it would be politically impossible to turn back the clock and recreate the Porfirian hacienda, they instead built an attack on the *ejido* by championing the plight of *pequeños propietarios*, literally “smallholders.” Unstated but always intended in the definition of this group was “private” rather than “*ejidal*.” In conservative rhetoric, these smallholders were the last bastion in resisting the land reform’s “total discouragement of private initiative,” as one partisan claimed in an American magazine in 1939.¹¹ While there were indeed thousands of small private farmers who held plots in the range of fifty to a hundred acres, the category of *pequeños propietarios* also provided a convenient cover for private owners of much larger plots, many beyond the legal limit permitted by the federal agrarian code, and it was often these farmers who became beneficiaries of this rhetorical campaign. In reinventing themselves from *hacendados* (hacienda owners) to small private farmers defending free enterprise, the detractors of the *ejido* skillfully co-opted revolutionary rhetoric to serve a distinctly counter-revolutionary purpose.¹²

Most importantly, though, the land reform’s opponents pioneered a propaganda campaign aimed at discrediting the recently expanded *ejidal* sector as economically backwards and a danger to national food security. While earlier conservative pundits had consistently disparaged the *ejido* as communistic, radical, or a foreign imposition, opponents of land reform in the late Cárdenas and Avila Camacho years turned instead to a critique of redistribution that was clothed in the seemingly neutral language of efficiency and production. The “true agrarian problem,” claimed one 1938 editorial in the

¹¹ Roberto Piña, “Mexico’s Runaway New Deal,” *American Mercury*, February 1939, 182.

¹² On the escalating rhetorical defense of “*pequeños propietarios*,” see Laura Randall, ed., *Reforming Mexico's Agrarian Reform* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior*, was not land but the “scarcity of agricultural production” in the wake of redistribution. With “uncertainty and mistrust” permeating the countryside and a new class of uneducated *campesinos* attempting to take the place of the *hacendado*, corn shortages were certain to follow, the editorial warned.¹³ After world war broke out in 1939, and especially after the United States joined the fray in 1941 and Mexicans began to worry about reduced imports from their northern neighbor, the fear of food shortages took on an increasingly political bent. Among the *ejido*’s opponents, it became commonplace to blame wartime shortages on “the failure of the *campesinos* to intensify their agricultural production,” as one editorial from early 1942 did, accusing a large proportion of *ejidal* recipients of “preferring to surrender to indolence” rather than working their fields.¹⁴ While pinning corn shortages on the breakup of the haciendas relied on rather flawed logic – as most large plantations had cultivated cash crops such as sugar and cotton for export rather than grain for domestic consumption – the strategy was nevertheless successful in forcing their opponents into a defensive stance.

On the other side of the political spectrum were the vocal defenders of the *ejido*. While small farmers who benefited from the land reform were steadfast supporters of the redistribution project and were often ready to defend it with arms, most of the public advocates of the *ejido* on the national stage were not *campesinos*. Many came from the political wing allied with Cárdenas, and others from the ranks of the professional world. A particularly vocal group was the generation of agronomists that had attended the

¹³ “El verdadero problema agrario,” *Excelsior*, February 22, 1938 (clipping from Josephus Daniels to Cordell Hull, February 28, 1938, RG 59, microfilm pub. M1370, reel 88, 812.52/2597, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD (hereafter NA)).

¹⁴ Fernando Leal Novelo, “Grave problema agrario que indica falta de intensificación agrícola por parte de los campesinos,” *Gráfico*, January 31, 1942 (file A02059, Archivos Económicos, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City (hereafter BMLT)).

National School of Agriculture at Chapingo during the 1910s and 1920s and had been politicized by the Revolution's rural struggle. The agronomists' self-identification as *agraristas* had been a professional gamble during the 1920s and early 30s, when the *ejido* fell out of favor under the political dominance of Plutarco Elías Calles. But as Cárdenas began to realize popular demands for the redistribution of land, the agronomists' allegiance to the state was firmly cemented. Finding support at the highest levels of government revitalized the agronomist wing, whose members even more explicitly pledged their scientific careers to the government's nascent political experiment. During the late 1930s, these agronomists joined a host of organizations dedicated to marrying science and politics, such as the Liga de Agrónomos Socialistas (League of Socialist Agronomists), Bloque de Agrónomos Revolucionarios (Block of Revolutionary Agronomists), and Frente Revolucionario de Agrónomos Mexicanos (Revolutionary Front of Mexican Agronomists). These groups would become some of the most prominent public defenders of the *ejido* during the 1940s.¹⁵

In stark contrast to their political adversaries, the revolutionary agronomists declared that the *ejido* was an institution worth investing in. If science and technology were extended to the *ejidatarios*, the agronomists and their allies stridently claimed, their small plots would far exceed the productivity of the old hacienda. As historian Joseph Cotter has argued, the agronomists' insistence that the *ejidos* required their technical guidance was not a selfless strategy but one that also sought to incorporate their profession within the "revolutionary family" that was then taking the reins of the

¹⁵ The two best accounts on the politicization of agronomists in the Cárdenas years are Michael A. Ervin, "The Art of the Possible: Agronomists, Agrarian Reform, and the Middle Politics of the Mexican Revolution, 1908-1934," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2002), and Joseph Cotter, *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880-2002* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

Mexican state. In their increasing partnership with the ruling party, the agronomists also revised their rhetoric, in a way not unlike the enemies of the *ejido*. Their earlier demands for rural social justice, encapsulated in the Zapatista slogan “land and liberty,” began to be replaced in the wake of the land reform by an econo-scientific justification of land redistribution. The hacienda was an institution that needed to be eliminated not only because of its social failings but because it “represents the medieval epoch in agriculture,” using “only the best lands it owns” and “no more equipment than a few oxen and a wooden plow,” as one editorialist accused.¹⁶ Mexico’s “rickety agriculture,” still “retain[ing] its antique processes and methods,” claimed the agronomist Marco Antonio Durán in 1942, was entirely the product of “the *latifundismo* that only began to topple in 1915.” To overcome this unfortunate situation, Durán pled that the agronomists, “acting as one man [and] closely identifying with the Mexican Revolution and the *campesinos*, should put all their strength into solving...the enormous problem that destiny has presented us.” That problem, as Durán and his peers recognized, was to raise the productivity of the land reform’s recipients.¹⁷

No figure better represented the agronomists’ wedding of scientific training and political activism, as well as their good political fortunes in the Cárdenas and Avila Camacho years, than Marte R. Gómez. As briefly explored in Chapter One, Gómez was from the northern state of Tamaulipas, but had been educated in Mexico City, completing his agronomy degree in the midst of the Revolution’s most violent years. As a teenager, he had fought in Emiliano Zapata’s southern army, and then during the 1920s had served

¹⁶ Ramón Beteta, “La distribución de tierras,” *El Nacional*, August 3, 1936 (clipping from Box 164, Archivo Ramón Fernández y Fernández, Biblioteca Luis González, Colegio de Michoacán, Zamora, Michoacán (hereafter ARFF)).

¹⁷ Marco Antonio Durán, “El aumento de la producción agrícola nacional,” *México Agrario* IV, no. 1 (1942).

on the National Agrarian Commission that analyzed how the government would restore communal lands. Gómez's political education in the crucible of the Revolution taught him three things, according to his biographer Michael Ervin: that peasants deserved to own the soil they tilled, that agricultural production had to be modernized for the sake of efficiency, and that cooperativism was the key that would make the first two possible. Unlike some *agrarista* intellectuals who solely championed collectivism and wished to eliminate all forms of land tenure outside of the *ejido*, Gómez believed cooperation between individually worked *ejidos* and even private farmers would enable smallholders to acquire modern technologies and negotiate commercial markets. Gómez put this philosophy to work over the 1920s as state secretary of agriculture in Tamaulipas and a key founder of the National Bank of Agricultural Credit, but the rightward turn under President Calles forced him out of politics, even leading to a three-year exile in France between 1930 and 1932.¹⁸

The *agrarista* renaissance led by Lázaro Cárdenas in the mid-1930s re-opened many political doors that had been closed to the revolutionary agronomists, and Gómez particularly benefited from the shift in political climate. Pledging an aggressive redistribution campaign, he was elected governor of his home state in 1936, a post that he held until 1940. During those years, he oversaw the division of hundreds of large estates, totaling 1.5 million acres of farmland granted to nearly 20,000 *ejidal* beneficiaries in Tamaulipas.¹⁹ Following redistribution, Gómez led an aggressive campaign to endow the

¹⁸ On Gómez's long career, see Michael A. Ervin, "Marte R. Gómez of Tamaulipas: Governing Agrarian Revolution," in *State Governors in the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1952: Portraits in Conflict, Courage, and Corruption*, eds. Jürgen Buchenau and William Beezley (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) and Gustavo Esteva, "Hosting the Otherness of the Other: The Case of the Green Revolution," in *Decolonizing Knowledge: From Development to Dialogue*, eds. Frederique Appfel-Marglin and Stephen A. Marglin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Ervin, "Marte R. Gómez of Tamaulipas," 129.

newly granted *ejidos* with credit, machinery, and agricultural education. He staged his flagship demonstration of *ejidal* cooperativism in El Mante, a wealthy sugar plantation district bordering with Veracruz, which Gómez eagerly showed to Henry A. Wallace in December 1940 as he escorted the U.S. Vice-President-elect down to Mexico City (see Chapter Four).²⁰ Yet Gómez's emphasis on cooperative rather than collective rural organization earned him enemies among the most radical of agronomists, who believed that private farms could never exist in harmony with state-granted *ejidal* farms. The governor disagreed, revealing that even among the agronomists who supported land redistribution, there were bitter divisions.²¹

Gómez's flexibility on *ejidal* organization and his commitment to following redistribution with education and technological investment made him an attractive candidate to head up the Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento (Secretariat of Agriculture and Development, or SAF) under Manuel Avila Camacho, who asked Gómez to join his cabinet in late 1940. Avila Camacho's cabinet selection is a matter of no small importance, because several generations of historians have pointed to the 1940 transfer of power as the most decisive turning point in post-revolutionary Mexican history, particularly on the agrarian question. Highlighting Avila Camacho's deceleration of the pace of land reform after 1940, they have argued that at this moment the ruling party turned away from rural development and toward reckless urbanization and industrialization. This interpretation, however, simplifies a much more protracted and unscripted process. Problematically reading backward into time the Mexican state's

²⁰ On Wallace's stop at El Mante, see Josephus Daniels to Cordell Hull, December 3, 1940, RG 59, 812.001 Camacho, Manuel A/97, Box 4112, Folder 2, NA.

²¹ On the far-left critique of Gómez, see especially Emilio López Zamora, *La situación del distrito de riego de El Mante* (Mexico City: Liga de Agrónomos Socialistas/Editorial Ramírez Alonso, 1939), and Ervin, "Marte R. Gómez of Tamaulipas," 133-4.

neglect of rural inequality during the 1950s and 1960s, too many historians have assumed that the ruling party's transition away from *agrarismo* was a foreordained affair. While I agree that Cárdenas' successor did shift gears in his pursuit of agricultural development, I don't believe that his emphasis on intensifying production on existing *ejidos* rather than granting new ones was a cover for undoing the land reform project. Instead, Marte Gómez seems to best reflect the ambivalent position of the new administration. Never a rigid doctrinaire, he sought to work within the realm of the possible. His goal, like many of his fellow revolutionary agronomists, was to redeem the *ejido* by making it a productive economic unit.²²

Presidential rhetoric in the early years of Avila Camacho's term reflected the strategic tightrope upon which the ruling party balanced in the years after Cárdenas left office. Avila Camacho and his colleagues sought to convince the public that even though they were slowing land redistribution, they were strengthening the *ejido* by endowing it with the support systems that Cárdenas never had time to establish. It was no easy task, but the President did it by skillfully blending the social propaganda of the Revolution and the scientific emphasis on productivity. "Since the agrarian reform intensified," the President told his agriculture department the month of his inauguration, "our social progress has been considerable, but technically and scientifically speaking, our agriculture has progressed quite little."²³ At a public event memorializing the death of Emiliano Zapata in Cuautla, Morelos in April 1941, Avila Camacho declared that "lands wrongfully unproductive" were the "antithesis not only of Zapata, but all of the heroes

²² My understanding of Gómez working within the "art of the possible" is influenced by Ervin, "Marte R. Gómez of Tamaulipas" and Ervin, "The Art of the Possible."

²³ Manuel Avila Camacho, "Acuerdo a la Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento," December 18, 1940, Cartas – 1940 – S-Z, AMRG.

who fought to open a road to justice.”²⁴ Perhaps most telling, though, was his exhortation to the National Confederation of Peasants in 1943 that the most compelling way of “demonstrating that the *ejido* system provides its fruits is to ostensibly augment [its] yields.” To do so, Avila Camacho pressured *campesinos* to practice cultivation with “the stick and the plow and not - as some farmers believe - with this pistol or the rifle,” thus explicitly beseeching rural people to renounce the militarized agrarian politics of the 1930s and adopt the production-oriented social consensus mentality that he sought to foster in the 1940s.²⁵ Such statements undoubtedly testified to a depoliticizing instinct within the ruling party, but taken in their historical context, they were not – as many scholars have suggested – merely a rhetorical foil for selling out the peasantry.

In the months after the December 1940 inauguration, the Avila Camacho government moved rapidly in turning rhetoric into action. Critiquing Cárdenas’ organization of the SAF as ineffective, Gómez disbanded the Agrónomos Regionales, the underfunded extension service that had sent a few dozen agronomists around the country to teach farmers modern methods, and closed several experiment stations which he believed were working on research disconnected from the needs of the local rural population.²⁶ After his long talks with Henry Wallace in December 1940, Gómez also grew convinced that Mexico needed a modern corn-breeding program, and he soon afterward established the SAF’s flagship breeding station at León, in the central state of Guanajuato. To head it up was Eduardo Limón, a graduate of Chapingo who had also

²⁴ Manuel Avila Camacho, “Texto del discurso pronunciado por el C. Presidente de la República, el 10 de abril de 1941, durante la ceremonia efectuada para conmemorar la muerte del caudillo Gral. Emiliano Zapata,” General Don Manuel Avila Camacho, 1940-1945, AMRG.

²⁵ Manuel Avila Camacho, “Discurso pronunciado en el Palacio de Bellas Artes con motivo del quinto aniversario de la fundación de la Confederación Nacional Campesina,” November 19, 1943, Manuel Avila Camacho papers (hereafter MAC), Box 1185, Folder 708.1/37, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN).

²⁶ Cotter, *Troubled Harvest*, 151-2.

earned a Master's degree in agronomy from Iowa State University during the 1930s. Upon Wallace's suggestions, Limón pursued a breeding program devoted to American-style double-cross hybrid corn – a technology which will be further explored below. Finally, in May 1942, Avila Camacho announced the first annual Plan de Movilización Agrícola, or Agricultural Mobilization Plan. The Plan pinpointed antiquated production methods, particularly the use of the Egyptian wooden plow, as the major obstacle to the *ejido*'s productivity, and pledged to distribute iron plows and chemical fertilizer to as many *campesinos* as it could. The Plan also set production goals for twenty food and fiber crops, dedicating the SAF to assisting farmers in meeting these goals.²⁷ On paper, the plan looked quite impressive. To Wallace, Gómez proudly claimed that Avila Camacho's assault on the nation's agricultural failings was "the most ambitious which in the history of Mexico has ever been attempted," and he may well have been correct.²⁸

The wartime years, however, were a difficult time to engineer a dynamic new strategy toward reinventing Mexican agriculture. More so than at any point since the violent years of the Revolution, national food self-sufficiency was severely imperiled. Poor weather and the failure of seasonal rains during 1941 and 1942 dramatically cut the corn supplies that provided the tortillas that fed the vast majority of urban and rural Mexicans. However, in contrast to the conservative critics who blamed the food drama of the early 1940s on the political experiments of the Cárdenas years, declining production of staple grains was due less to poor *ejidal* production and the shake-up in land tenure and more to extranational concerns, particularly Mexico's agricultural cooperation with the United States in the early years of World War II. Upon taking office, Avila Camacho

²⁷ Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento, "Plan de Movilización Agrícola," June 1942, Box 143, ARFF).

²⁸ Marte R. Gómez to Henry A. Wallace, March 31, 1942, Documentos Oficiales – 1942 – Vol. II, AMRG.

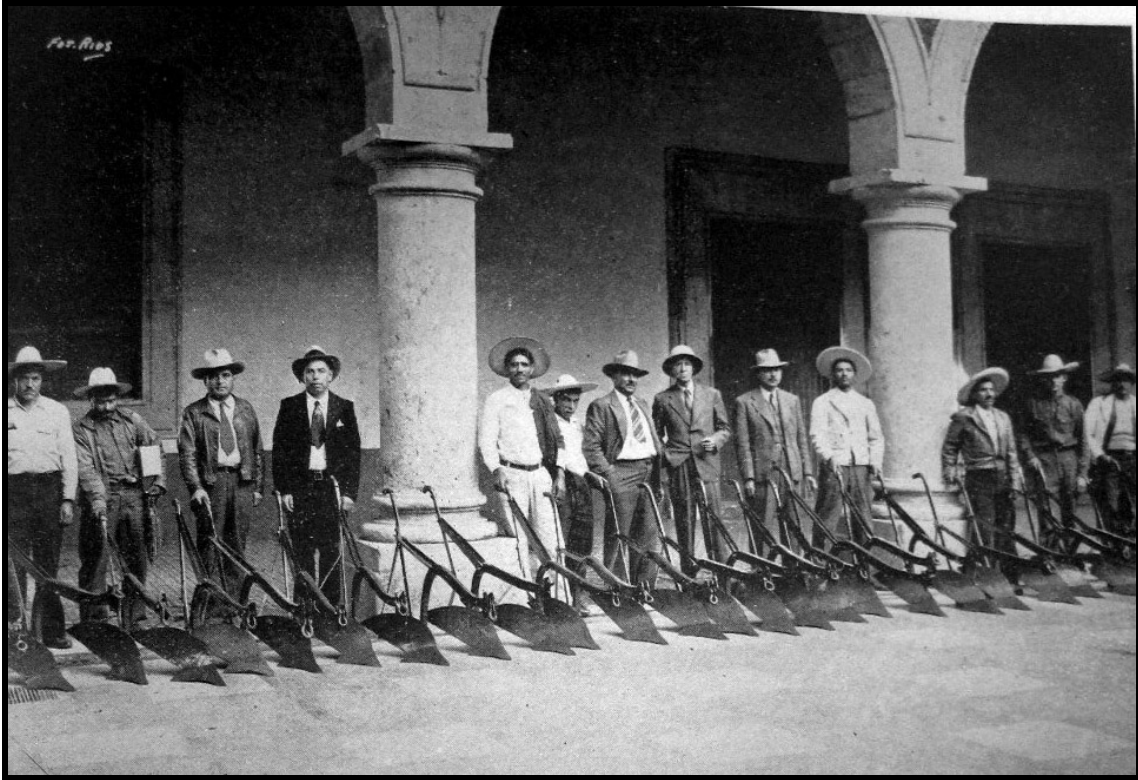


Figure 5.1. Distributing iron plows to farmers in Jalisco, 1943. Promoting the use of advanced equipment and machinery was one of the main goals of the Plan de Movilización Agrícola, President Avila Camacho's ambitious attempt to raise *ejidal* production with technological investment. (Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento, "Informe de labores Sept. 1943 – Aug. 1944," Avila Camacho papers, Box 1001, Folder 606.3/97, AGN)

had adopted a friendly stance toward the Roosevelt government, and hoped to expand wartime cooperation. With Henry A. Wallace as their American go-between, Avila Camacho and Gómez agreed to aid the U.S. war effort by growing “strategic” crops that could not be produced at home, such as guayule rubber and castor beans for oil production, in exchange for promises of discounted American agricultural machinery. Between 1941 and 1943, the Mexican state devoted federal land to such crops and encouraged their cultivation among northern farmers. What neither government expected, however, was the profound impact that the climbing price of rubber and oil-seed crops would have on Mexican corn production, which had rarely been a profitable crop in prior years. Seduced by the promise of high prices, farmers rapidly turned former grain land

over to oil-seed and fiber production. As corn production fell and food prices rose, George Messersmith, the American ambassador who replaced Josephus Daniels in late 1941, admitted that “we have been at least partially instrumental in disorganizing [the] Mexican agricultural economy.” Therefore, at the very moment when the Mexican revolutionary state sought to prove that the *ejido* was a productive economic unit, it faced profound extranational challenges even beyond those of the late 1930s.²⁹

In the first few years of his term as agriculture secretary, Gómez found himself assailed from all sides, and quieting conservative hysteria about the land redistribution’s role in reducing production was one of his primary objectives. Publicly, Gómez assured crowds that the “well-worn charge” of food scarcity was nothing but a political ploy to “discount the Agrarian Reform,” and that rising prices were only the product of unscrupulous speculators.³⁰ Privately, though, during both 1941 and the following year he acknowledged the crisis and prepared for the very real possibility of corn shortages, seeking to ease the political blow of scarcities should they arrive.³¹ Through his personal connection to Wallace, he pressured for the availability of U.S. corn imports should a serious shortage arise, reminding the Vice President of the sacrifices Mexico was making for the American war effort.³² Gómez also convinced Avila Camacho of the dire nature

²⁹ George Messersmith to Philip Bonsal, October 4, 1943, RG 59, 812.5018/87, Box 4148, Folder 4, NA. On the U.S.-Mexican agricultural cooperation of the wartime years and its consequences for Mexican food production, see Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico*, Chapter 4, Mark Finlay, *Growing American Rubber: Strategic Plants and the Politics of National Security* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), Chapter 5, and Stephen R. Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1945* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 1995), 93-95.

³⁰ Marte R. Gómez, “Discurso que el ingeniero Marte R. Gómez pronunció en la comida de los Rotarios,” November 1942, Discursos de Marte R. Gómez, Archivo Marte R. Gómez, Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico City (hereafter AMRG).

³¹ On Gómez’s acknowledgement of corn shortages and rising prices to colleagues in government, see Marte R. Gómez to the Director Gerente del Banco Nacional de Crédito Agrícola, March 31, 1942, Documentos Oficiales - 1942 - Vol. II, AMRG.

³² On Gómez using claims of Mexican wartime sacrifice to secure favors from the U.S. government, see especially Gómez to Wallace, March 30, 1943, Cartas - 1943 - T-Z, AMRG.

of the situation. In response, to minimize hoarding and artificial price inflation, the President founded the Nacional Reguladora y Distribuidora (National Regulatory Distribution Corporation), a federal agency that was chartered to oversee the storage, transportation, and marketing of all basic food grains.³³ Ultimately, as a last recourse, Avila Camacho wrote personal letters to all of the state governors beseeching them to raise corn yields to avert a political catastrophe.³⁴

It was in the context of this crisis to prove the productivity of the tenuously established *ejidal* system that Gómez first received the Rockefeller Foundation's request



Figure 5.2. Portrait of Marte R. Gómez by Frida Kahlo, 1944. No public figure better understood the political challenges that faced the *ejido* in post-Cardenista Mexico than Gómez, Avila Camacho's secretary of agriculture, who had fought for that institution since the 1910s. In this commissioned Kahlo portrait, Gómez appears visibly burdened by the task that confronted him: to prove that the *ejido* could be as productive as the large-scale plantation or hacienda (Collection of Hilda Leal de Gómez, Mexico City; digital image from Nader Library, www.naderlibrary.com/frida.pix.37.htm)

³³ Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico*, 74-6.

³⁴ For the letter that went out to every state's governor, see Manuel Avila Camacho to Rodolfo T. Loaiza (and others), January 20, 1944, MAC, Box 760, Folder 545.2/83, AGN.

to begin a cooperative program in agricultural improvement, and it was no surprise that it perked the agriculture secretary's interest. As one early member of the MAP scientific team remembered, "the government realized that the yield of the *ejidos* was going down rather than up, and that something must be done about it."³⁵ In speaking with the Foundation's representatives, Gómez grew convinced that their vision of rural development did not clash with the one that he had devoted most of his life to. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the survey team sent down to Mexico in 1941, along with much of the Foundation's leadership in New York that had worked in the U.S. South, sympathized with *ejido* farmers and were committed to working within the framework of communally held farms. By partnering with a political wing that was actively seeking to bolster the land tenure system established by Cárdenas, the Rockefeller Foundation was decisively taking sides on one of the most divisive rural issues in Mexico, and that decision was of profound importance to shaping their early program. Because of the Green Revolution's social failings in the 1960s and 1970s, most scholars have assumed that the RF entered Mexico seeking only to raise production by cooperating with large, commercial farmers, and was thus implicitly at odds with the *ejidal* system. As the following section devoted to the MAP's first year will illustrate, this was hardly the case.

The Early Rockefeller Program and Experiments in Appropriate Technology

On February 5, 1943, George Harrar and Elvin Stakman arrived to Mexico City to initiate an agricultural research and extension program that was, at that point, little more than a loose formal agreement and a contradictory set of goals and motivations. It was

³⁵ Edwin J. Wellhausen Oral History, June 1966, RFA, RG 13, RAC, pg. 166.

Harrar's first time in Mexico, and Stakman had not been in the country since the survey team's visit nearly two years earlier. Once settled in the capital, they traveled to the site that had been established for them by Gómez's SAF, located on the grounds of the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo, forty kilometers west of Mexico City in the state of México. It was a humble beginning: the Rockefeller program began with one building and a few acres of test plots. Gómez's selection of the Chapingo campus as home to the Rockefeller program was rather symbolic, though, as it was on those grounds that he had begun his education as both agronomist and *agrarista*. The campus was a former hacienda that had belonged to one of Porfirio Díaz's political bosses but was expropriated during the early days of the agrarian reform. In the old chapel that had been converted into a monument to the Revolution by one of Diego Rivera's most famous murals, the school's motto was proudly displayed: "here we teach the exploitation of the soil, not the man."³⁶

A few days after their arrival, the Rockefeller team met at SAF headquarters in Mexico City with Gómez and his two foremost lieutenants: Alfonso González Gallardo, the sub-secretary of agriculture who handled most of the department's technical policy and planning, and Eduardo Morillo Safa, who was responsible for the financial operations of the agency. Their meeting was of no minor importance, because their agenda was to set the primary research goals of the Rockefeller program and plan its first year of activity. They decided that the Mexican Agricultural Program would be incorporated

³⁶ In Spanish, the verb "explotar" has a slightly different meaning than "exploit" in English. When applied to human beings, it does connote the same negative, imbalanced relationship that is implied in the English, but when applied to land or soil it more closely means "cultivate," without any negative implications. However, the metaphor deserves greater exploration, considering the environmental costs of the land reform project, as Mikael Wolfe argues most convincingly for in the case of the Laguna region. On Chapingo and the national significance of Rivera's mural there, see Jennifer Krzyminski Younger, "Utopía Mexicana: Diego Rivera's Program for Chapingo Chapel, 1924-1927," (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1999).

within the SAF as the Oficina de Estudios Especiales (Office of Special Studies, OEE). After reviewing the technical details of office space and staff, Gómez emphasized the domestic nature of the Rockefeller program. Unlike the American government programs that were aimed at providing wartime goods for the United States, the Rockefeller scientists ought to focus on food crops for national consumption. But which crops were to receive priority? Gómez was quite specific on this question: “the most important agricultural problems in Mexico” were “wheat improvement and rust control, crop improvement by breeding (especially corn), and soil improvement, in that order.” At a luncheon the following day, González Gallardo too expressed his “deep interest” in the problem of wheat production. As Stakman observed, the Mexicans understood the control of wheat diseases to be “the most important single problem” in the nation’s agriculture.³⁷

In spite of the fact that both Harrar and Stakman’s scientific training and expertise lay in the pathology of wheat, they nevertheless found Gómez and González Gallardo’s emphasis on that crop “rather unexpected,” as they believed it “doubtful whether [wheat] actually is the most important single problem.” Reporting to Rockefeller headquarters after his 1943 stay in Mexico, Stakman even went so far as to describe the SAF’s overemphasis on wheat as the result of “distorted perspective.”³⁸ From the 1941 survey team’s first observations of Mexican agriculture onward, it had been assumed among all of the MAP’s members that the low yield of corn, not wheat, was the most obvious obstacle to raising the rural standard of living. The distinction between targeting corn and

³⁷ On the agenda of their meeting, see diary of J. George Harrar, February 8-9, 1943, RFA, Officer Diaries microfilm (accessed digitally on CD), RAC. On the MAP emphasizing the distinction between their program and the U.S. “strategic crops” campaigns then being waged, see George Payne to John A. Ferrell, March 24, 1943, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 4, RAC. Stakman’s quote is from E.C. Stakman, “Report on Agricultural Activities in Mexico,” May 20, 1943, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 60, RAC.

³⁸ All three Stakman quotes are from “Report on Agricultural Activities in Mexico,” May 20, 1943, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 60, RAC.

wheat was no minor matter, but cut straight to the heart of the divided Mexican countryside. Corn was raised nearly everywhere in the country, but its core production zone was in the densely populated central plateau, where most farmers cultivated small plots, were commonly of indigenous heritage, and existed on the outskirts of cash economies. These cultivators had little access to irrigation, capital, or recent technological innovations, and the primary goal orienting their agricultural practices was not surplus or profit, but security and subsistence. Wheat, on the other hand, was a far different crop. Consumed in far lesser quantities than corn, wheat was grown predominantly by larger commercial farmers in the arid northern regions of the country. Utilizing artificial irrigation and machinery, these farmers more closely resembled those of the American Midwest, in their more individualistic rural culture and participation in national and international markets. Much of the revolutionary political elite of the pre-Cárdenas era had come from this wheat-producing zone, and their political clout persisted into the 1940s. Gómez's agricultural perspective was likely shaped by pressure from these northern growers, who had struggled in earlier years with a fungal disease known as *chahuixtle*, or wheat rust, which dramatically reduced yields.³⁹

The SAF's "rather unexpected" emphasis on wheat cultivation also revealed the racial and cultural contradictions that undergirded the revolutionary government's hopes to remake *campesino* life by targeting diet, a campaign that historian Jeffrey Pilcher has called the "tortilla discourse."⁴⁰ Since the Porfirian era, modernizing urban elites blamed the *campesinos'* diet of corn, beans, and chiles for stunting their physical and intellectual

³⁹ On the divergences in the cultivation of wheat and corn in Mexico, see especially Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution*, Chapter 5.

⁴⁰ See Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), Chapter 4.

development, even going so far as to suggest that the consumption of corn inherently produced backward, dark-skinned people in contrast to strong and virile wheat-fed Europeans. The revolution tempered some of this rhetoric, but it persisted to a surprising degree. Even at the height of Cardenismo, a member of the agriculture ministry turned up his nose at the “little varied, badly flavored [and] insufficient” rural Mexican diet.⁴¹ Marte Gómez, himself a northerner, was no stranger to such rhetoric. In a letter to Henry Wallace in 1941, Gómez unfavorably compared the “apathetic natures, sadness, indifference toward life, and short stature” of corn-fed southern Mexicans with the “stronger and better built individuals” living on wheat and dairy in the North.⁴² The corn shortages of the early 1940s only exacerbated elites’ disdain toward a corn-based diet, and one editorialist suggested that “just as the problem of coal has been resolved through the use of gasoline, so will the crisis of corn be resolved with the use of bread as a substitute.”⁴³ Ironically, later scientific studies revealed that the diet of corn tortillas, beans, chiles, and the fermented drink *pulque* was nutritionally complete, far better than that of other poor rural regions, notably the American South.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the role of the tortilla discourse in shaping the SAF’s agricultural priorities demonstrated that even among a political wing genuinely devoted to the strengthening of the *ejido*, Eurocentric cultural impulses hampered their understanding of *campesino* life.

⁴¹ Alberto Franco, “Defectos de la alimentación del *campesino*,” *Agricultura* 1, No. 9 (November 1938).

⁴² Marte Gómez to Henry A. Wallace, February 21, 1941, Cartas – 1941 – Q-Z, AMRG.

⁴³ “Formula de salvación: pan en vez de tortilla,” *El Universal*, September 27, 1943, (clipping from Box 122, ARFF).

⁴⁴ A major study, that was actually funded by the Rockefeller Foundation as well, was Richmond K. Anderson, et. al., “A Study of the Nutritional Status and Food Habits of Otomi Indians in the Mezquital Valley of Mexico,” *American Journal of Public Health and the Nation's Health* 36 (August (1946). That article makes active comparisons between the American South, where some of its researchers had previously worked. The best scholarly examination of the wisdom and adequacy of the Mexican rural diet can be found in Wright, *The Death of Ramón González*, Chapter 6, and Gene C. Wilken, *Good Farmers: Traditional Agricultural Resource Management in Mexico and Central America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Under pressure from Gómez and the SAF, Stakman and Harrar grudgingly promised that the Mexican Agricultural Program's first campaign would be devoted to the problem of wheat and its disease *chahuixtle*. Stakman admitted that in any case, the wheat program "was the only phase of work that could be started during the limited time" that he was in Mexico, which was less than two months.⁴⁵ Since both men were trained in wheat pathology, they agreed to devote their time first to that crop. However, they also redoubled their efforts to secure a permanent corn breeder in hopes of launching the corn program as soon as possible. Acknowledging that the SAF was pushing the MAP for a wheat breeding and pathology program, rather than vice versa, overturns another historiographical charge leveled at the early Rockefeller program in Mexico.⁴⁶ As a number of scholars have claimed, the MAP's early interest in wheat supposedly revealed their disdain for the small-scale corn farmers who made up most of the nation's rural population. Instead, the early emphasis on wheat was due more to the regional favoritism and cultural contradictions among the SAF's Mexican leadership, and the MAP emerged looking more sensitive to the class divisions among Mexican farmers than did the government planners.

It was not long after Harrar and Stakman arrived to Mexico that the first Foundation supervisors came down to oversee the organization of their research program. The first to visit, significantly, were not from the Foundation's Natural Sciences division, which formally administered the project, but from the U.S. southern wing that had played such a large role in building support for the program. Rather than Frank Hanson, the

⁴⁵ E.C. Stakman, "Report on Agricultural Activities in Mexico," May 20, 1943, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 60, RAC.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Wright, *The Death of Ramón González*, Fitzgerald, "Exporting American Agriculture," Hewitt de Alcántara, *Modernizing Mexican Agriculture*, three of the most influential accounts of the early Green Revolution.

program's nominal leader in the New York office, it would be John Ferrell of the International Health Division and Albert Mann of the General Education Board who were tasked with overseeing the early establishment of the research program and evaluating its priorities, and they arrived to Mexico City in early April of 1943, two months after the program's formal start. Describing why Mann was sent in his stead, Hanson told Harrar that "there seems no doubt that at least part of the Mexican picture is not too different from some of the more backward agricultural parts of our own South, in which Mr. Mann's own program falls."⁴⁷ For two weeks that April, Mann and Ferrell stayed together in Mexico City and traveled with Harrar and Stakman to get a feel for the region's rural life and problems. In his evaluation, Mann found no fault with the way that Stakman and Harrar had begun their work, agreeing with them that the wheat work was necessary to appease their Mexican partners but perhaps misguided, since "diets of tortillas, beans, and chilies may be much more satisfactory than has hitherto been believed." As he saw it, corn breeding should be the program's future emphasis.⁴⁸

The U.S. southern experience of the philanthropies was reflected most clearly in the hiring of personnel during the early years of the MAP, wherein a majority of staff additions had experience working in poor rural regions of the U.S. South. Harrar, the program's on-site director, had worked in southwestern Virginia for several years. The MAP's first hire was their full-time corn breeder, Edwin Wellhausen, who was recruited from the West Virginia Experiment Station in Morgantown in September 1943. That selection was so unorthodox that the geographer Carl Sauer and his friend and botanist

⁴⁷ Frank Hanson to George Harrar, April 8, 1943, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 4, RAC.

⁴⁸ Albert Mann, "Observations in Mexico," April 25, 1943, General Education Board papers (hereafter GEBCP) Series 1.2, Box 201, Folder 1909, RAC. On Ferrell's observations, which touch less upon the MAP than Mann's report, see John Ferrell, "Report of Trip to Mexico," May 8, 1943, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 24, Folder 167, RAC.

Edgar Anderson wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation expressing their surprise at the “selection of a bearer of light from West Virginia,” a “backward American region” that they suggested, tongue in cheek, might instead benefit from “Mexican missionaries” of agriculture.⁴⁹ The Foundation’s second hire in early 1944 was William Colwell, a soils specialist who was working at North Carolina State College in Raleigh, Josephus Daniels’ hometown. And then in early 1946, Harrar interviewed and hired John Pitner, an additional soils specialist who was a graduate of Mississippi State College and was then working at an experiment station in the Mississippi Delta.⁵⁰

Yet more than any other scientist on the MAP team, it was the regional experience of Paul Mangelsdorf that would most dramatically impact the Foundation’s early program in Mexico. Like his senior colleagues Stakman and Bradfield, Mangelsdorf had turned down a permanent appointment with the MAP, preferring to serve the Foundation as a member on the agricultural Advisory Committee that would periodically review the work of Harrar and his team. But after the MAP had serious trouble finding a permanent corn breeder in early 1943 and saw their work on the Mexican corn program subsequently stalled, Mangelsdorf agreed to secure a leave of absence at Harvard and spend the summer and fall of 1943 at Chapingo. He would begin a corn breeding program to be taken over by the full-time breeder – Wellhausen – who ultimately joined the team in September. While Mangelsdorf was not born in the South, he had spent many of his career’s formative years in east Texas, breeding and introducing new corn varieties to

⁴⁹ Carl Sauer to Joseph Willits, August 23, 1943, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 6, RAC. The “bearer of light” quote is from Sauer’s letter, the others are from the Anderson letter, dated August 19, 1943, which was enclosed in Sauer’s letter to Willits.

⁵⁰ On the recruitment of Colwell, see Harrar diary entry, February 26, 1944, RFA, Officer Diaries microfilm (accessed on CD), RAC; on Pitner’s hiring see Harrar diary entry, February 25, 1946, RFA, Officer Diaries microfilm (accessed on CD), RAC.

small farmers in a region where cotton and tenancy dominated the landscape. With its divisions of race, class, and ethnicity, the countryside of east Texas more closely resembled rural Mexico, much more so than Kansas, where Mangelsdorf had grown up, or Massachusetts, where he would later work.⁵¹

During his thirteen years as a corn specialist at the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station in College Station, between 1927 and 1940, Mangelsdorf witnessed a veritable revolution in the American cultivation of corn. In the year that he began his job in Texas, nearly all corn growers across the nation planted their fields with seed from the previous year's crop, selecting varieties to plant based on criteria ranging from yield to aesthetics to drought resistance. It was an activity that farmers took pride in, and in selecting seed they drew on a deep well of multi-generational, place-based knowledge. By 1940, however, when Mangelsdorf left Texas, a majority of American farmers were planting corn seed that had been purchased from commercial seed vendors. In hopes of achieving higher output and potentially greater profits, many farmers had sacrificed some of their much-touted independence by establishing dependent relationships with seed companies who were then preaching a gospel of miraculous explosions in yield should farmers use their new "hybrid" varieties. Witnessing the sea change in corn growing from his vantage point in College Station, Mangelsdorf, however, was skeptical. "The farmers in the eastern half of Texas," remembered Mangelsdorf later, "were predominantly small farmers, and they were not receptive to change as the farmers of west Texas who farmed on a much larger scale." Among the commercially oriented west Texans, hybrid corn made dramatic inroads during the 1930s, but Mangelsdorf grew concerned about

⁵¹ For the best examination of the cotton belt of East Texas at this time, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

“whether or not we could ever get the small Texas farmer to pay out \$10 or \$12 a bushel for hybrid corn and whether we could keep him from saving his own seed and buying new seed every year.” The region’s lack of access to cash, irrigation, and credit, as well as its imbalanced system of land tenure, complicated the triumphalist narrative that seed merchants were using to win over farmers in the rural Midwest.⁵²

To fully comprehend the significance of Mangelsdorf’s rejection of hybrid corn’s utility for his East Texas constituents, we need to briefly explore the genetic mechanics behind hybridization. First off, hybridization was far from the first time that humans genetically “engineered” the characteristics of maize. Since the dawn of agriculture, careful human selection over countless generations had transformed the grass *teosinte* from yielding a minuscule ear to its quite sizeable early-twentieth-century variety. Nevertheless, hybridization did represent a departure, because it involved complete human oversight of the plant’s reproduction. With a new understanding of trait inheritance that followed the rise in popularity of Mendelian genetics in the 1910s and 1920s, breeders across the United States began to selectively mate specific plants and animals with hopes of isolating genetic traits they viewed as favorable. Since maize was one of the easiest species to do this with, as the corn plant has both male and female sexual organs, it was an obvious and early target of the breeding campaigns. Farmers and breeders had long known that if they “selfed” corn, or fertilized a target plant with its own pollen, the offspring would be a much weaker and smaller plant than the original,

⁵² Paul C. Mangelsdorf oral history, November 1966, RFA, RG 13, RAC, 21. Karin Matchett has done important work in drawing attention to Mangelsdorf’s unconventional approach to corn breeding in Mexico, particularly in her dissertation and a recent publication; see Karin E. Matchett, “At Odds over Inbreeding: An Abandoned Attempt at Mexico/United States Collaboration to ‘Improve’ Mexican Corn, 1940-1950,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 39, no. 2 (2006) and “Untold Innovation: Scientific Practice and Corn Improvement in Mexico, 1935 - 1965,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2002). However, Matchett does not emphasize the role of U.S. regionalism in honing Mangelsdorf’s social philosophy of technology, nor the importance of his transregional comparisons in shaping the early MAP.

just as inbreeding in humans caused genetic defects. If one selfed an already inbred plant, even further genetic deterioration would be witnessed. But in the 1910s, a few breeders crossed two separate inbred lines and found that their offspring yielded a much larger plant and ear, which combined the best elements of each parent; they called this a “double-cross” hybrid. But they also noted a problematic consequence. When the kernels of the double-cross hybrid were themselves planted as seed, hybrid vigor was not displayed in the following generation. Hybridization thus granted temporary rather than permanent benefits, to one generation only.⁵³

To commercial seed companies, however, the temporary benefits of hybrid corn were an advantage rather than a disadvantage, for the reduced yields of the second generation offered them the potential of selling seed to farmers on an annual, rather than a one-time, basis. To reap the benefits of double-cross hybrids, corn farmers had to break with their age-old routine of selecting and planting from last year’s crop, and purchase seed every year from firms that devoted themselves solely to breeding and producing hybrids. American farmers’ reaction to such a suggestion was, predictably, marked by skepticism and distrust. Throughout the 1920s, the few seed companies who marketed hybrid corn had little success in converting farmers, especially in the midst of a rural economic depression. However, during the 1930s the planting of double-cross hybrid seed skyrocketed. But rather than a foreordained conclusion, in which farmers inevitably chose to use hybrids because of their superior quality, the transition was largely the product of political interventions. As earlier discussed in Chapter Two, the New Deal

⁵³ The story of hybrid corn’s “discovery” has been retold countless times, and I am admittedly simplifying it here for the sake of brevity. My understanding of the process derives from my reading of Jack R. Kloppenburg, *First the Seed: The Political Economy of Plant Biotechnology, 1492 - 2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and Deborah Fitzgerald, *The Business of Breeding: Hybrid Corn in Illinois, 1890 - 1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

USDA paid farmers to reduce their acreage of key crops, one of which was corn. With extra cash in the bank, and contending with a reduced planting size, farmers saw greater incentive in experimenting with the hybrids that seed companies were then promoting. In 1933, hybrid seeds were planted on 0.4 percent of American cornfields; by 1945 that number had risen to 90 percent, with the Midwest nearing one hundred percent. Thus, in the postwar years, both the USDA and seed companies were heralding hybrid corn as the future of U.S. agriculture. Nearly drowned out in the hubbub were the dissenting voices, pointing out the decline in farmers' independence, the social impacts on the horizon, and hybrid seeds' deskilling of farmers.⁵⁴

The proliferation of hybrid corn across the American Midwest was so dramatic that many observers, both then and afterward, assumed that the double-cross method represented the only possible outcome, or at least the apex, of modern corn breeding. However, there were dozens of alternatives that breeders explored during the 1930s, perhaps more often on paper than in the field. Jack Kloppenburg and Karin Matchett have each argued that the double-cross hybrid came to dominate the American landscape not because it was the most efficient or productive solution, but because it had the weight of mobilized capital behind it. Alternatives were overlooked or marginalized simply because they did not offer the same profit potential that double-cross hybrids did. The most renowned spokesman for alternatives to the double-cross model was Merle T. Jenkins, a corn breeder at the USDA's Bureau of Plant Industry. During the 1930s, Jenkins championed what was called a "synthetic" variety, based on the same Mendelian genetics that undergirded the double-cross method, but with a major difference. When breeding a

⁵⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Business of Breeding*, 220; Matchett, "At Odds Over Inbreeding," 349-351. On the deskilling impact of hybrid corn, see Deborah Fitzgerald, "Farmers Deskilled: Hybrid Corn and Farmers' Work," *Technology and Culture* 34, no. 2 (1993).

double-cross hybrid, the two parent lines were commonly selfed up to seven or eight generations to “purify” genetic traits before they were crossed, and the convenient result of this excessive inbreeding was that the drop in yield in the hybrid’s second generation was so dramatic as to convince farmers that replanting seed was a lost cause. Jenkins, on the other hand, used two alternative methods: either crossing two inbred lines after only a generation of inbreeding, or crossing an inbred line with an open-pollinated one. Both strategies produced higher-yielding plants that unlike the conventional double-cross would not greatly decline in yield in subsequent generations. The implications of Jenkins’ method were rather revolutionary: with a one-time purchase, farmers could almost replicate the yields of their double-cross-planting neighbors, but without having to repurchase seed. And because the subsequent generations of synthetics reproduced via open pollination – that is, randomly – the plants also adapted quicker to local environments.⁵⁵

One of Jenkins’s disciples during the 1930s was Paul Mangelsdorf of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. Uncertain that double-cross hybrids made sense on the social and economic landscape of eastern Texas, Mangelsdorf remembered that in the late 1930s he “began to think about other ways of using hybrids there,” and came across the work of Jenkins. Like Jenkins, Mangelsdorf was attracted to the idea of distributing synthetics to the small farmers in his district. If a farmer did insist on growing a second generation from the seed distributed, Mangelsdorf reasoned, he “wouldn’t take the terrible loss that he would in the second generation of a double cross. He would still have a better corn than the one that he had been growing.”⁵⁶ Mangelsdorf dedicated himself to this

⁵⁵ Kloppenburg, *First the Seed*, 105-112; Matchett, “At Odds Over Inbreeding,” 362-3.

⁵⁶ Paul C. Mangelsdorf oral history, November 1966, RFA, RG 13, RAC, 24, 21.

utilitarian campaign of technological assistance, sensitive to the economic limitations of small-scale farmers, during the last years of the 1930s. In November 1939, he joined Jenkins in organizing the First Southern Corn Improvement conference in New Orleans, where he served as both Executive Committee chairman and Texas's state representative. In his report to the conference, Mangelsdorf championed synthetic varieties as he had earlier arrived at "the conclusion that hybrid corn would never be used as extensively in the South as in the Corn Belt."⁵⁷

It was Mangelsdorf's heterodox approach to corn improvement that had caught the eye of Albert Mann, who actively pushed to have Mangelsdorf included on the survey team and then the Advisory Committee. When Mangelsdorf arrived to Chapingo to initiate the MAP's corn program in August 1943, he quickly drew comparisons between east Texas and central Mexico. As he had done in the United States, pursuing synthetic corn varieties struck him as "also the most logical thing to do in Mexico." Eschewing his profession's increasing myopia toward double-cross hybrids, Mangelsdorf envisioned a corn research program that was better tailored to small farmers' needs than an approach that solely emphasized yields. That summer, after writing to Merle Jenkins for practical advice, Mangelsdorf drew up a strategic plan for how the MAP would achieve this goal. First, he planned to gather a massive database of native corn varieties in central Mexico, to figure out which were the best local corn strains available. Secondly, a few varieties would be chosen based on both their yield and their adaptability to a range of climates and elevation. These strains would then be inbred one generation and crossed with another similarly inbred plant, or an open-pollinated variety. The resulting synthetic seed

⁵⁷ Merle Jenkins, "Report of the First Southern Corn Improvement Conference," November 24, 1939 (Washington, DC: Unknown publisher, 1939).

would then be reproduced in greater quantity, then to be distributed to local farmers either by the MAP directly, or by the SAF's rather skeletal extension system. When Edwin Wellhausen, Mangelsdorf's full-time breeder replacement, arrived in the fall, he would take over the program.⁵⁸

However, in beginning work on a corn breeding program that looked beyond the American standard of the double-cross hybrid, Mangelsdorf and then Wellhausen came into conflict with Eduardo Limón's state-sponsored corn breeding program at León, which had been established in 1940 by the incoming Avila Camacho administration. Trained in Iowa, Limón had been successful in winning the support of Henry Wallace when the Vice-President elect had visited Mexico. Upon learning of Limón's breeding work, which was then underfunded and languishing in Michoacán, Wallace gushed to both Avila Camacho and Gómez of the importance of Limón's breeding program. Wallace's support likely played a large role in Avila Camacho's founding of the León station and his transfer of Limón to lead it. With his training in the Corn Belt, however, Limón and his staff at León relentlessly pursued double-cross hybrids as the most effective way to improve Mexican corn growing. The relationship between the León station and the MAP was somewhat unclear and awkward, as both were subdivisions of the SAF, but Mangelsdorf hoped that the two offices could work together. That proved an unrealistic expectation, and relations between the Rockefeller scientists and Limón and his staff were stiff and excessively formal during 1943. Mangelsdorf and Wellhausen

⁵⁸ Mangelsdorf remembered that Mann had been "quite impressed with this particular phase that I was doing in Texas," and had pressured Hanson to include him on the first committee. Mangelsdorf oral history, pg. 45, RFA, RG 13, RAC. "Most logical" quote is from pg. 67. On the exchange between Mangelsdorf and Jenkins in May and June of 1943, see Matchett, "At Odds Over Inbreeding," 363, note 52. On the planning of the early MAP corn program, see Mangelsdorf oral history, 67-68, and Edwin Wellhausen oral history, pgs. 76-78, RFA, RG 13, RAC.

came to believe that Limón feared their agency as a professional threat, and that he was single-mindedly devoted to the double-cross hybrid as the only means of improving Mexican agriculture.⁵⁹

Growing frustrated with the conflicting visions of the two branches, and acknowledging that the first few months of the Rockefeller corn program would be decisive in shaping their entire project in Mexico, Mangelsdorf decided to raise the question of corn breeding with the chiefs of the SAF. In December 1943, at the tail end of his temporary residence, he wrote to the SAF's Alfonso González Gallardo and candidly expressed his doubt whether double-cross hybrid corn "will fill the needs of the small farmer whose maize culture is limited to producing a crop sufficient to feed himself and his family." To make his point to the SAF leadership, he relied upon his regional experiences in the United States:

Hybrid maize has not been especially successful in the Southern part of the United States *where conditions are more nearly comparable to those of Mexico than are those of the Corn-Belt*. Where acreages are small, where maize is not ordinarily a cash crop but is grown primarily for home consumption, it is difficult not only to educate the farmer to purchase new seed each year, but also to create the necessary machinery for providing the small quantities of seed needed by the individual farmer.

If the SAF wanted to develop a double-cross hybrid program, argued Mangelsdorf, it should do so, as there is "undoubtedly a place for hybrid corn of this type among the larger planters." But complementing this approach with a campaign to distribute

⁵⁹ On the early MAP's tensions with Limón, see Edwin Wellhausen oral history, RFA, RG 13, RAC, 32-37; on Limón and the León station, see Cotter, *Troubled Harvest*, 151-2; on Wallace's connection see Henry A. Wallace oral history, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 1287-8.

synthetics to small-scale farmers, he claimed, made much more sense for the future of Mexican agriculture. It was in this direction that the MAP chose to proceed.⁶⁰

Therefore, by early 1944, when the Mexican Agricultural Program was set to celebrate its first birthday, its research agenda was deeply inclined toward making the benefits of agricultural technology available to all Mexican farmers, particularly those who lacked cash and capital. In large part, this reflex grew from scientists' and administrators' prior experience working with problems of rural poverty in the United States, particularly in the cotton South. While scholarly critics of the Rockefeller Foundation's program have frequently assumed that arriving American scientists forced their Mexican counterparts toward development strategies that were obsessively aimed at increasing yield and output, rather than emphasizing fair social and economic distribution, in the early years of the MAP that was hardly the case. Instead, Rockefeller scientists and planners at times displayed greater sensitivity to the social problems of technological implementation than did the revolutionary agronomists who had built their professional careers on a defense of the small-scale farmer in Mexico. When Harrar declared in the program's first annual report of December 1943 that "much of the future success of [Mexican] agriculture is dependent upon the success of the *ejidal* system," and that "consequently, every effort is being made to aid the *ejidatarios* to increase production, conserve their soils, and attain a higher subsistence level," he was underscoring his research team's willingness and commitment to adapting their scientific training to the social framework of the Mexican agrarian revolution.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Paul Mangelsdorf to Alfonso González Gallardo, December 10, 1943, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 6, RAC. Italics are mine.

⁶¹ "Annual Report, Rockefeller Agricultural Program in Mexico, Feb. 1 to Dec. 1, 1943," RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 6, Folder 1, RAC.

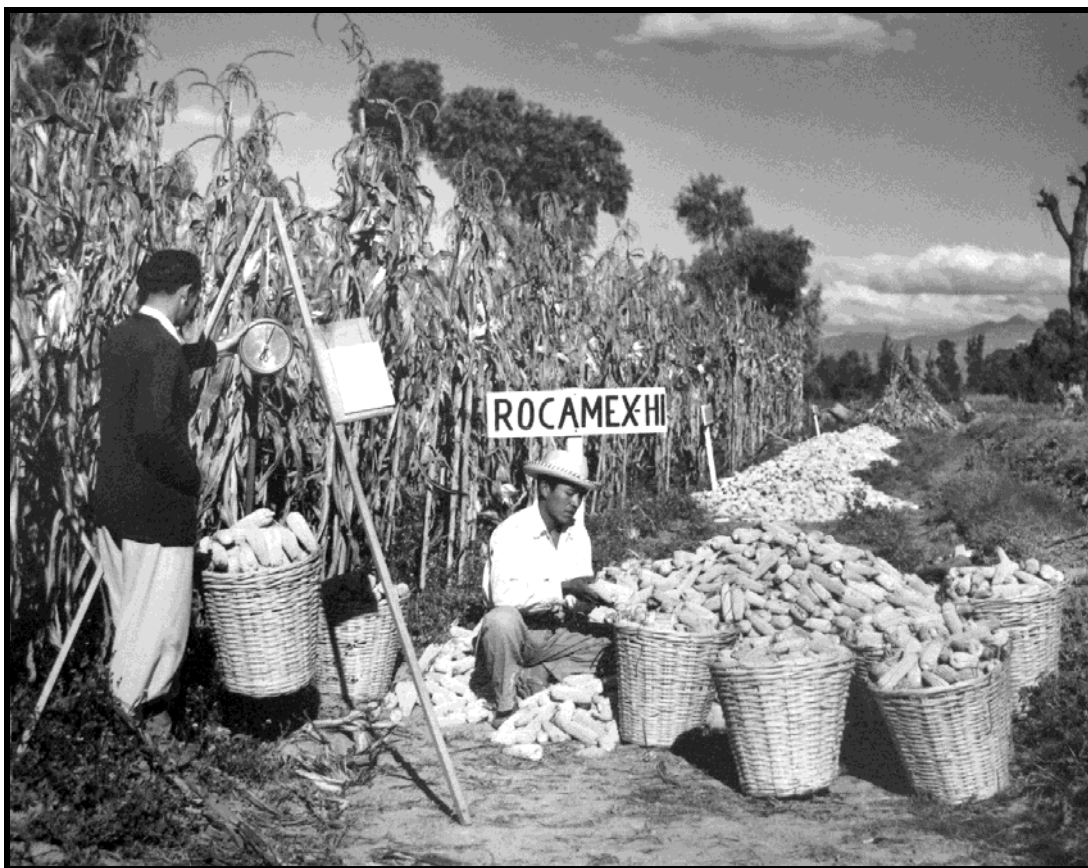


Figure 5.3. Shucking Rocamex corn for seed distribution at Chapingo, mid-1940s. The first MAP corn varieties bred for Mexican farmers were synthetics and did not require annual re-purchasing of seed. The Foundation's experience with U.S. southern farmers was a major impetus behind this experiment in appropriate technology (RFA, Photo Albums, 323 Agriculture)

A year into its life, then, the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican program was still in its early stages, but was beginning to show signs of stability and identity. Both Stakman and Mangelsdorf, after their temporary residences to tutor the MAP's Chapingo team, had returned to the United States. Their vision of a research program tailored to local needs and the dynamics of the *ejidal* system, however, was carried onward by George Harrar and then Edwin Wellhausen and William Colwell, the second and third hires of the growing program. Each agreed with the Advisory Committee's emphasis on research that would prove immediately beneficial to the nation's majority of small-scale farmers. At the insistence of Marte Gómez, the MAP had also begun carrying out investigative work on wheat rust, but with its only wheat expert Harrar often tied up with

administrative concerns, that program moved slowly. Colwell, whose expertise lay in soil fertility, undertook a research program to restore fertility to the soils of central Mexico, waged primarily with green manures and other inexpensive alternatives to commercial fertilizer. But it was corn breeding that received the majority of funding and attention, and Wellhausen continued down the path that Mangelsdorf had set during the summer and fall of 1943. By 1946, the MAP hoped to release its first set of synthetic corn varieties to the SAF and local farmers.

The early research agenda of the MAP, informed jointly by the Foundation's regional experiences in the United States, the concurrent transformation of American agricultural science, and the social rhetoric of the Mexican revolution, began as an idealistic attempt to help the Avila Camacho government realize its pledge to make the *ejido* blossom and bear fruit. In the following years, those lofty goals would be tested by structural obstacles to rural change, the shifting Mexican political climate, and the difficulties of cross-cultural cooperation. In the next chapter, I explore how in the following years the Rockefeller program interacted with these shifting trends, which dramatically came to a head during 1946 and placed the MAP at a decisive crossroads. By the very last years of the decade, a transformation in Mexican politics combined with the escalating pressure on the Foundation to tailor their global activism to fit American geopolitical goals in the Cold War would force a reinvention of their Mexican agricultural project. That reinvention would ultimately serve to exclude the interests of the small farmers that the MAP had initially targeted, and it was this later, narrow vision of agricultural development that would be exported across the globe as part of the global Green Revolution in the 1950s through 1970s.

CHAPTER 6

NARROWING VISIONS: THE COLD WAR AND ‘MEXICAN MIRACLE’ POLITICS IN THE MAKING OF AN EXPORTABLE GREEN REVOLUTION, 1945-1950

In the first three years of the Rockefeller Foundation’s experiment in Mexican agricultural assistance, its planners forged a research and extension program that sought to boost the production of small farmers who had benefited from Lázaro Cárdenas’ land reform campaign of the previous decade. Influenced both by Mexican revolutionary social rhetoric and by the scientific team’s experience working with smallholders in the American South, plant breeders like Paul Mangelsdorf and Edwin Wellhausen implemented an agricultural research program that relied on tailoring agricultural technologies to social realities, thus significantly departing from the more technocratic strategies that historians often associate with the Green Revolution. Decades before “appropriate technology” became a watchword among development theorists, the Rockefeller Foundation was experimenting with its potential.

After 1945, however, that alternative development strategy would be tested by the professional desires of Mexican agronomists, increasingly conservative currents in Mexican politics, and the escalating geopolitical demands of the global Cold War. Each of these factors combined to ensure that by 1950, when the Foundation first exported its Mexican model into Colombia, much of their earlier emphasis on democratizing technological benefits had been excised. This chapter tells the story of how the Green Revolution’s planners came to narrow their vision for the countryside and set their

project on a path of global expansion. Along the way, the strategies born of scientists' experiences in and memories of the American South, so crucial in nudging them toward acknowledging social divisions and historical inequalities, would slowly disappear and be replaced by a more confident and hubristic vision of rural development.

Negotiating a Maturing Research Program

As Rockefeller scientists dedicated themselves to a research program that departed from the mainstream of American agricultural science, they sought to convince their Mexican collaborators in the SAF and the broader agronomical profession, some of whom had been trained in the United States, that such approaches were wise. In doing so, however, the American scientists encountered a rather contradictory set of values, goals, and ideologies. As Joseph Cotter has argued, Mexican agronomists in the post-Cárdenas era remained committed to the *agrarista* program that they had championed during the 1920s and 1930s, but they also sought to redefine themselves as *técnicos*, or technical specialists, rather than mere political agitators. Attacks in the press had forced many agronomists into a defensive stance, such as one 1945 editorial claiming that “the agronomist who is only a politician dances to the song of whomever is paying the fiddler,” rather than truly seeking to aid farmers. As the ruling party moderated its rhetoric of redistribution toward a new emphasis on agricultural productivity and efficiency, agronomists who hoped to maintain the bonds they had established with the ruling party during the 1930s likewise tempered their public presence. The widely shared goal of professionalization led many agronomists to adopt a positive stance toward the Rockefeller scientists, whom they saw as representative of the American scientific

establishment. But when those scientists claimed that U.S. models could not neatly be transplanted onto Mexican soil, the response among the agronomists was varied and unpredictable.¹

The question of hybrid corn versus synthetic varieties was a predictable flashpoint. When Paul Mangelsdorf wrote to González Gallardo in late 1943 on the tension between the MAP's corn breeding strategy and Eduardo Limón's, his criticism instigated an internal debate within the Agriculture Secretariat that was not quickly resolved. While much of the evidence of the SAF debate is either disorganized or missing from the government archives, the Secretariat's published annual report from summer 1944 neatly reflects the divisions within the bureau. In that document, its authors begin by preaching the gospel of hybrid corn, detailing the recent dramatic gains in U.S. midwestern corn yields as "the example most illustrative of what we could achieve" in Mexico. But just pages later, describing the bureau's partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation, they reprinted large sections of Mangelsdorf's December letter on the value of U.S. southern models, citing its "very valuable opinions." And when the SAF detailed their resolutions on corn breeding strategy later in the report, it was clear that Mangelsdorf's suggestion carried considerable weight. The authors of the report cited three goals ranked in order and significance: first, collecting and identifying "indigenous varieties," second, producing and distributing synthetic seed "so that the farmer who does not perceive the advantages of hybrid corn or does not have the resources to buy or barter for such seed year after year can at least reproduce it and obtain it without having to

¹ Román Badillo, "El ultimo ganso: Ing. Fabila," *El Universal*, August 6, 1945 (clipping from Cartas – 1945 – D-G, Archivo Marte R. Gómez, Mexico City (hereafter AMRG)). On the larger professional transformation in Mexican agronomy during the mid-1940s, see Cotter, *Troubled Harvest*, especially Chapter 5.

sacrifice a large percentage of his production.” Ranked last was their campaign to “form double-crosses adapted to specialized zones where farmers can buy new seed each year.” If Mangelsdorf had not fully dampened the SAF’s romance for hybrid corn, he had at least been somewhat successful in reducing its priority.²

While Mangelsdorf and his colleagues had some success in swaying the leadership of the Agriculture Secretariat, that success did not always trickle down to the local branches and stations of the SAF. In particular, their relations with Limón remained strained throughout the mid 1940s. Mangelsdorf found it “greatly disturbing” that Limón, “one of the few men who was already doing fairly effective work when the Foundation came to Mexico,” refused to cooperate with the Americans.³ Wellhausen remembered that when the MAP gave Limón corn seed to be reproduced at the León station, he refused to plant it on his best lands, choosing instead an old baseball field with packed-down soil that made a loose seed bed impossible and doomed the crop.⁴ Limón was also cultivating political and public support for his program to counter the MAP’s cozy relationship with Gómez and the SAF. In the fall of 1944, Ernesto Hidalgo, the governor of Guanajuato, accompanied Marte Gómez on a visit to Limón’s station and wrote a gushing editorial about the breeder’s work a few days later in Mexico City’s *El Universal*. In his quest for hybrids, or “the perfect seed,” Limón was engineering a “positive work of magic,” wrote Hidalgo. Following the path of great American scientists

² Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento, “Informe de labores de la Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento del 1 de Sept. de 1943 al 31 de Ago. de 1944,” August 31, 1944, Manuel Avila Camacho papers (hereafter MAC), Box 1001, Folder 606.3/97, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN).

³ Paul Mangelsdorf to E.C. Stakman, August 20, 1946, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (hereafter RFA), Record Group (hereafter RG) 1.1, Series 323, Box 9, Folder 57, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY (hereafter RAC).

⁴ Edwin Wellhausen oral history, RFA, RG 13, RAC, 35.

like Edward East, George Shull, and Henry Wallace was the best strategy toward conquering the “grave corn problem,” claimed the governor.⁵

When Hidalgo’s editorial was reprinted several times and began to generate unprecedented public interest on behalf of hybrid corn, Marte Gómez felt compelled to respond to the allegations that Hidalgo had made in the press, and wrote to *El Universal* in November 1944. His published response clearly reflected the SAF leadership’s alliance with the MAP. Critical of hybrids being presented as a panacea for Mexican corn growing, Gómez warned that “these types of maize cannot be obtained by *ejidatarios* or private farmers without knowledge, dedication and experience and without the adequate material means.” Instead, Gómez championed “synthetic varieties,” which “give nearly the same yields as the hybrids, but do not require the annual change of seeds because they have the capacity to transmit their good characteristics to successive generations.” As the SAF was working toward both hybrid varieties and synthetics, Gómez urged farmers, especially the “common cultivator,” to refuse the seductive appeal of perfect seeds and wait for government-bred synthetics.⁶

While he sided publicly with the Rockefeller Foundation’s breeding strategies, Gómez nevertheless felt a deep ambivalence about allying with foreign scientists to achieve domestic goals. While he rarely expressed his discomfort with his American partners in a public setting, privately Gómez harbored doubts about whether the Rockefeller team’s approach, no matter how tailored to a Mexican context, could produce

⁵ Ernesto Hidalgo, “Hacia la solución científica del grave problema del maíz,” October 13, 1944, *El Universal* (clipping from Box 123, Archivo Ramón Fernández y Fernández, Colegio de Michoacán, Zamora, Michoacán, Mexico (hereafter ARFF)).

⁶ For examples of the reprinting of the Hidalgo comments, see “Técnica y producción,” *El Universal*, October 17, 1944 (file A02059, Archivos Económicos, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City (hereafter BMLT)); for Gómez’s comments see “Habla Agricultura sobre la polinización del maíz,” *El Universal*, November 12, 1944 (clipping from box 123, ARFF).

an autonomous class of scientific professionals. Writing in May of 1944 to an agronomist friend stationed in Venezuela, he admitted that “the men of Anglo-American science are not supermen,” believing that Mexican scientists “could compare with them, on the condition that we have that which we lack now: research laboratories and researchers with a research spirit.” But in the meantime, as the nation built up its scientific potential, Gómez believed that Mexicans would have to resign themselves to being junior partners in agricultural science. If “for three centuries we were a political colony; in our first century of independent life we were an economic colony; it won't mean much if at the middle of the second century we continue as an intellectual colony,” he wrote. If the price of intellectual colonialism could buy Mexico an independent and functioning scientific establishment, Gómez believed, it was a price worth paying.⁷

The MAP scientists would likely be surprised at the agriculture minister's characterization of their program as colonialist, as in private communications they imagined their participation as selfless and appropriate to Mexican society and culture. And in comparison to rural development projects waged at the peak of the Cold War, they were not entirely wrong. Indeed, throughout 1944 and 1945, Harrar and his expanding team hewed close to their original strategy of emphasizing corn over wheat, synthetic breeds over double-cross hybrids, and organic fertilizers over commercially manufactured ones. Harrar continued to claim that it was “readily demonstrated that the introduction of American corn varieties for Mexico is unsatisfactory,” while Stakman agreed that “the range of adaptability of double crosses produced in the United States is likely to be rather narrow in Mexico, if indeed the best American double crosses are

⁷ Marte Gómez to Gonzalo Garrido, May 17, 1944, Cartas – 1944 – E-G, AMRG.

suitable at all.”⁸ In a June 1945 report to the SAF, Harrar and his team insisted again that in the United States “synthetic varieties have been found to be most useful where hybrid corn is not economically feasible,” explicitly citing the work of Merle Jenkins at the USDA. Wheat received little attention in that report, and on the question of fertility the MAP team emphasized the utility of green manures such as clover and vetch to “increase the average corn yields of Mexico with a minimum expense to the farmer.” Social, economic, and environmental concerns thus dovetailed neatly in program policy.⁹

Perhaps most exemplary of the MAP’s continuing sensitivity to social and economic problems, though, was their deep resistance toward letting private enterprise dominate the push toward Mexican agricultural development. Considering the biting criticisms that scholars have leveled at the Green Revolution in Mexico, with Adolfo Olea-Franco explicitly arguing that the campaign was a “planned business strategy and in no way a philanthropic enterprise to end hunger,” unearthing the early resistance of the Rockefeller scientists toward the penetration of commercial seed companies is especially surprising.¹⁰ Leaders of the American seed industry were eager to start business in Mexico, as evidenced by the renowned corn breeder and publicist Roswell Garst of Pioneer Hi-Bred wooing the SAF with free samples of hybrid corn and invitations to visit Iowa in 1941.¹¹ But the Advisory Committee quickly balked at the possibility of letting the so-called “free market” solve the problems of Mexican farmers. Noting the increasing

⁸ George Harrar, “Progress Report of RF Agricultural Program in Mexico,” November 1, 1944, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 6, Folder 3, RAC; Elvin Stakman, “Mexican Agricultural Project Report with Confidential Supplement,” October 7, 1944, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 60, RAC.

⁹ “Report of the Oficina de Estudios Especiales, S.A.F., Feb. 1, 1943 – Jun. 1, 1945,” RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 6, Folder 1, RAC.

¹⁰ Adolfo Olea-Franco, “One Century of Higher Agricultural Education and Research in Mexico,” 721.

¹¹ On Garst’s dealings with the Mexican government, see Francisco Castillo Nájera to Roswell Garst, November 25, 1941, clasificación III-147-1, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Tlatelolco, Mexico City (hereafter AHSRE).

“pressure for assistance to commercial corn-breeding organizations that are beginning to operate in Mexico,” Stakman warned in April 1945 that if the government or the philanthropy were to pursue such a strategy, there was “danger that there may be intentional or non-intentional exploitation of Mexican growers.” Particularly, “commercial organizations may over-advertise their products and sell seed corn for areas to which the particular line, variety, or hybrid is not adapted.”¹² Well aware of the dislocations produced by the commercialization of seed in the United States, Stakman and his colleagues counseled a different path for Mexico.

Yet within the MAP, the seeds of a development strategy that was less attuned to socioeconomic sensitivities were also being planted in the mid-1940s. Particularly crucial was the program’s third hire in late 1944, after Wellhausen and Colwell, of Norman Borlaug. Borlaug was an Iowan wheat pathologist who had studied under Stakman at the University of Minnesota. In stark contrast to the other MAP hires that had spent their careers in public service in the rural South, Borlaug had begun work in the commercial agribusiness sector, at DuPont, while still finishing graduate school. When Harrar came under pressure from the SAF that the wheat program was moving too slowly, he hired Borlaug in the fall of 1944. The following spring, Borlaug was given leadership of the wheat program, which had until then been languishing. As chief of wheat breeding, Borlaug, in addition to targeting rust, aimed to breed wheat plants that stood shorter than most local varieties and could absorb water and fertilizer at a quicker rate. Yet unlike the rest of the MAP team, who restricted their work on corn, beans, and soils to the Chapingo campus or other experiment stations in central Mexico, Borlaug in his first two years

¹² Elvin Stakman, “Report of Mexican Trip with Confidential Supplement regarding Mexican Agricultural Improvement Project and Personnel,” RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 60, RAC.

began making overtures toward cooperation with wealthy commercial farmers, including Plutarco Elías Calles's son Rodolfo, in the northern state of Sonora. Sonora was one of the national centers of wheat cultivation, but was located more than a thousand miles away from Mexico City. Borlaug's insistence on working with farmers in the northwest led to a bitter conflict with Harrar, who firmly rejected his proposal to leave the central plateau behind. "We've got to win our fight right here," Harrar told Borlaug early on, "in the poverty areas." While initially rejected, Borlaug kept insisting that if the MAP wanted to engineer a rapid revolution in wheat yields, they had to partner with the farmers most able to put new technologies into practice.¹³

The divided mind of the Rockefeller agricultural program in 1945 was reflected in a visit to Chapingo by Carl Sauer, the American geographer who had earlier critiqued the program for what he perceived as an attempt to transplant the rural U.S. Midwest upon the Mexican countryside. During 1945, Sauer had won a grant from the Foundation's Social Sciences division to study the cultural and social significance of corn in Central America, a project that had surprisingly little interaction with Natural Sciences' agricultural program. But when Sauer was passing through Mexico City in February of that year, Joseph Willits, the RF's Social Sciences Division chief, asked the geographer to visit the MAP at Chapingo and draw his conclusions on their progress and strategy. Sauer was immediately impressed with the corn program and Edwin Wellhausen, who gave "the impression of feeling his way intelligently into his problem," wrote Sauer to

¹³ Harrar quote is from Leon Hesser, *The Man Who Fed the World: Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Norman Borlaug and His Battle to End World Hunger* (Dallas: Durban House Publishing Company, 2006), 51. This book is admittedly a questionable source, considering its poor documentation and uncritical position on the Green Revolution, and I plan to do further research in the Borlaug papers to avoid relying on a shaky secondary source like this one. Despite being such a compelling figure in whose career was wrapped up the contradictions of American-led agricultural development, little scholarly work has been done on Borlaug.

Willits. Wellhausen was not “one of those natural scientists who remain unaware of the cultural medium in which they are working,” but instead realized “that they must work with the native corns.” But if Sauer had praise for the MAP’s corn program, he quickly pointed to the “pitfalls in the wheat campaign,” which was then being pioneered by Norman Borlaug. “Too much wheat is being grown now rather than too little,” Sauer argued, and warned of the “attendant emphasis” within the wheat campaign on “commodities which [only] the privileged faction of the population can absorb.” If the MAP was genuinely interested in working within the cultural milieu of ordinary Mexicans, Sauer implicitly suggested, they should focus solely on corn.¹⁴

The internal contradictions budding within the Mexican Agricultural Program would bloom during 1946, a tumultuous year which the following section of the chapter will explore. That year represented both the high water-mark of the socially sensitive MAP, and, ironically, the beginning of the decline of that development strategy. The year brought a shake-up in the Rockefeller program’s leadership, a rededication to reaching common farmers, and a symbolic visit from two popular champions of a prosperous and just countryside. Yet it also ushered in a new political regime in Mexico that was far less sympathetic to the subtleties of rural inequality and appropriate technology, along with a new attention within the Foundation to the geopolitical concerns then arising out of the rapidly chilling Cold War.

At the Crossroads: 1946

The first crisis that precipitated the transformations of 1946 was the unexpected death of Frank Hanson, the Natural Sciences’ interim wartime chief and the lead director

¹⁴ Carl Sauer to Joseph Willits, February 12, 1945, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 391, Folder 4636, RAC.

of the MAP, in July of 1945. Hanson had overseen the MAP since its 1943 founding, but had not taken a particularly activist role in doing so, more often allowing the Advisory Committee to make the major decisions when they met bi-annually. With Hanson's death, the MAP was without a formal administrator, and Foundation president Raymond Fosdick and the Advisory Committee sought to make a fitting replacement. By November of 1945, they decided that Albert R. Mann was the candidate best suited to lead the MAP. Mann, who was then preparing to retire from his position as director of the General Education Board's New Southern Program, had been a crucial link between the philanthropies' U.S. southern experience of the late 1930s and the Mexican program of the 1940s. During the negotiation process that created the MAP, Mann had been one of the foremost advocates of integrating New Deal-style extension programs in Mexico, modeled after the Farm Security Administration and Seaman Knapp's demonstration campaign (see Chapter Four). In contrast to Hanson, who was a biologist, Mann had no formal training in agricultural science, but rather in sociology and agricultural economics. Given the title of Deputy Director for Agriculture, Mann would supervise the MAP from New York and assumed "primary responsibility" for the project's operation.¹⁵

Beginning his formal stewardship of the MAP in June of 1946, Mann's first action was to push for a dynamic extension program that would better translate laboratory results into practical benefits for central Mexican farmers. Before then, extension had been a rather neglected field within the Rockefeller program, despite the importance of Seaman Knapp's legacy and his demonstration model in propelling the Foundation

¹⁵ On Mann's appointment and the creation of his new position, see Albert Mann to Warren Weaver, January 1, 1946, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 9, Folder 57, RAC; "primary responsibility" quote is from "RF Memorandum on NS Agricultural Program in Mexico," March 8, 1946, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 2, Folder 11, RAC.

toward launching the program in 1941 and 1942. A detailed strategy for reaching common farmers had not been a central part of the original 1943 agreement with Gómez and the SAF, instead postponed for when the program had demonstrable results. In the program's defense, there was little possibility of making much of an impact through extension at that time, with their handful of employees and limited budget. Neither did the SAF oversee a particularly ambitious extension service, which was limited to a few dozen employees. During a 1944 visit, after witnessing corn shortages in rural Mexico, a galvanized Stakman made an emotional plea for "making science function in alleviating unfortunate conditions as quickly and directly as possible," but once the worst shortages were over, he retreated from his pleas for immediate extension.¹⁶ Therefore, when in 1946 Mann argued that the time had come when laboratory discoveries should be actively pushed into the hands of Mexican farmers, he was marking a significant milestone in the program's history.

With Mann's encouragement, the Advisory Committee and the Chapingo-based RF staff in mid-1946 began to ponder how they might begin the long-term program of extending their findings outward into rural Mexico. Richard Bradfield suggested hosting field days at Chapingo where they would invite "leaders of the *ejidos*" and "other influential citizens of the community" to observe the progress that the MAP and SAF were making together, and possibly bring seeds back with them.¹⁷ Stakman too rekindled his commitment to extension, suggesting that the MAP publish a newsletter and sponsor short courses for agricultural teachers. However, he believed that the most significant contribution they could make was convincing the Mexican state to take the lead in the

¹⁶ Elvin Stakman to Frank Hanson, January 26, 1944, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 7, RAC.

¹⁷ Richard Bradfield to Paul Mangelsdorf, July 23, 1946, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 9, Folder 57, RAC.



Figure 6.1. Albert Mann near Guadalajara, Jalisco, 1944. The director of the General Education Board's New Southern Program until 1946 and chief administrator of the MAP from 1946 to 1947, Mann was a crucial link between the philanthropies' regional U.S. experience and their Mexican experiment. (Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RF photo albums, 323 Agriculture)

extension project, particularly in distributing the seed varieties then being bred at Chapingo. Under such a federal distribution program, Stakman envisioned an approach tailored to the varying needs of farmers of different social classes, wherein “the method of distribution to *ejidatarios* might be different from that of landowners.”¹⁸ When Mann and the Advisory Committee met in New York in October of 1946, they reached a consensus “that the time is ripe for extension work in Mexico,” planning to both push the SAF for increased participation and also augment their own efforts toward demonstration work, agreeing to expand their budget to hire their first extension specialist. Under Mann’s leadership, therefore, the MAP had turned a decisive corner.¹⁹

¹⁸ Elvin Stakman to Albert Mann, September 5, 1946, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 9, Folder 57, RAC.

¹⁹ “Annual Meeting of the Advisory Committee, Mexican Agricultural Program,” October 17, 1946, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 67, RAC.

In broaching the task of extension, however, the program's leaders also raised nagging questions about the necessity of social and economic studies in contemplating Mexican agricultural development. In a critical moment that has been recalled by several historians, in October 1946 Foundation trustee William I. Myers pressed the MAP leadership to analyze the "economic aspects of Mexican agriculture" by hiring an agricultural economist to complement their scientific staff. Mann and Harrar boldly declined his request, expressing "serious doubt as to the wisdom of entering the field of the economic settings of agriculture."²⁰ Imagining that such studies would inherently be sensitive to the needs of small-scale farmers, several scholars have argued that this moment clearly illustrated the MAP's disregard for the socioeconomic consequences of their program.²¹

Yet when placed in context, Mann and Harrar's rejection of Myers' request actually testifies to the MAP's continuing commitment to working with *ejido* farmers, rather than the opposite. William Myers, as it turns out, was no champion of small-scale agriculture, but rather a firm believer that fewer and larger farms represented the future of rural life. During the 1930s, Myers had put this philosophy to work in his management of the U.S. Farm Credit Administration, and he had likewise been a major critic of the Farm Security Administration's rhetorical promises to marginal farmers. Reviewing the MAP's work in 1946, Myers was deeply critical of the Foundation's devotion to working with *ejido* farmers, as "there is question as to whether the limitations on the *ejidal* assignments of land may not, in many cases, be so uneconomic as to defeat efforts to raise the level of

²⁰ Albert Mann, "Topical Diary of Visit to Mexican Agricultural Program," October 6, 1946, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 9, Folder 58, RAC.

²¹ See, for example, Harwood, "Peasant Friendly Plant Breeding and the Early Years of the Green Revolution in Mexico," 395-6, and Fitzgerald, "Exporting American Agriculture," 471-2.

agriculture.”²² Myers’ suggestion to introduce economic studies was not intended to defend small-scale farming units, but to prove their inefficiency. Mann and Harrar, fully realizing that for Americans working in Mexico to publicly challenge the *ejido* during the 1940s would be political suicide, thus turned down Myers’ misguided request. After all, as this chapter and previous one have illustrated, the MAP had dedicated the first three years of its existence to fortifying the *ejido*, and was not prepared to turn its back on that institution.

During Mann’s tenure as director of the MAP, he also orchestrated a symbolic visit that reflected the program’s alliance with progressive agrarian elements in both the United States and Mexico. Coming at the high water-mark of the program’s sensitivity to social and economic inequalities, the visit presented a dramatically different vision of the Green Revolution than is commonly imagined. In the fall of 1946, the Avila Camacho administration invited Henry A. Wallace back to Mexico to attend the President’s last address to Congress, as Avila Camacho’s term was coming to an end in November. As Wallace had attended the 1940 inauguration, the Mexican President thought it would be an appropriate gesture to have Wallace back before his *sexenio* (six-year term) was over. By 1946, however, Wallace was a far different political being than he had been in 1940. Spurned by the Democratic Party in 1944 when his Vice Presidential candidacy was passed over in favor of the moderate Harry Truman, Wallace had grown increasingly at odds with the Democrats in the following years, as they abandoned key elements of the New Deal platform and began antagonizing the Soviet Union. In July of 1946, when

²² Albert Mann, “Topical Diary of Visit to Mexican Agricultural Program,” October 6, 1946, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 9, Folder 58, RAC. On Myers’ long career in American and global agriculture, see Douglas Slaybaugh, *William I. Myers and the Modernization of American Agriculture* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996).

Wallace received the invitation from Avila Camacho, he was the Secretary of Commerce, a post he had received from Roosevelt as a consolation for 1944, but Truman disliked Wallace and was planning for his removal. Therefore, if Wallace on his first visit to Mexico had represented the New Deal at high tide, in 1946 he was increasingly on the margins of American liberalism.²³

Learning of Wallace's coming visit, Mann planned an elaborate public event that would bring Wallace to visit MAP headquarters at Chapingo, demonstrating to him their recent accomplishments. As Wallace had been "quite influential in directing the Foundation's attention to the possible opportunities" in Mexican agriculture," Mann believed that the former Vice President's return to Mexico could provide a symbolic demonstration of the Foundation's unconventional attempt to aid farmers through technology adapted to their interests.²⁴ To do so, however, Mann also chose to invite two others to join Wallace in his press-friendly tour of the Chapingo grounds: Marte Gómez, whose discussions with Wallace had earlier laid the groundwork for a cooperative program, and Lázaro Cárdenas himself, the father of the land reform experiment that the MAP had allied with. The reunion of these three men in the MAP's experimental corn plots had the power to visually demonstrate the union between Mexicans and Americans, and also between agricultural science and socially conscious technical assistance.

Wallace's visit, highly publicized in the press, revealed many Mexicans' romanticization of Wallace as an alternative to his increasingly rightward-leaning colleagues in Washington. "Mr. Wallace's program for the betterment of the common man," claimed one Mexico City newspaper, was "the same as that of the Mexican

²³ John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), Chapter 21.

²⁴ Albert Mann to Henry A. Wallace, August 28, 1946, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 2, Folder 12, RAC.

revolutionary government in the fields of education, agriculture, land redistribution, and labor legislation.”²⁵ Wallace played up such interpretations in speaking to the cheering crowds that met him, proclaiming that while many believed that the United States was “a land of millionaires,” there were in fact “millions of workers who don't receive enough to lead a decent, normal life,” and that his government had “much to learn from the other countries in this hemisphere.”²⁶ As Elizabeth Borgwardt has illustrated, Wallace epitomized a wing of liberal New Dealers who were eager to promote their solutions to American inequalities as readily applicable beyond the United States.²⁷ Wallace was eager to predict a bright future for the countryside, but he emphasized a developmental path that departed from that of the United States. When asked at a press conference whether American hybrid corn would be useful in Mexico, Wallace replied that “for maize as with all Mexican problems, we should use Mexican methods to solve them.” Such sentiments were increasingly rare among Wallace’s colleagues in Washington.²⁸

At Chapingo, Wallace joined Cárdenas, Gómez, and a host of other distinguished public figures on a carefully guided tour led by George Harrar and his staff. They walked through the growing number of laboratory buildings, witnessing Mexican and American scientists and trainees together working on the breeding of wheat, corn, beans, green manures, and also the utilization of chemicals and fertilizers. The highlight of the tour,

²⁵ Quotation is from State Department news summary (translation is theirs), in David Thomasson to the Secretary of State, September 12, 1946, RG 59: Records of the State Department, 033.1112/9-1246, Box 26, Folder 3, NA. For other positive editorials on the Wallace visit in the Mexican press, see “La idea de la democracia en Wallace,” *El Popular*, September 7, 1946 (file N22414, Archivos Económicos, BMLT), and “Wallace habla de interamericanismo,” *Excelsior*, September 5, 1946 (file N22414, Archivos Económicos, BMLT).

²⁶ Henry Wallace, “La democracia es un ideal constantemente revolucionario,” September 6, 1946, *El Nacional* (file N22414, Archivos Económicos, BMLT).

²⁷ Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 157-159, 170.

²⁸ “Cálidos elogios de Avila Camacho hizo Mr. Henry Wallace,” *Novedades*, Sept. 3, 1946 (clipping from State Department report, David Thomasson to the Secretary of State, September 3, 1946, RG 59, 033.1112/9-346, Box 26, Folder 2).

however, and the demonstration that most impressed both Wallace and Cárdenas, was their visit to the experimental corn plots where synthetic varieties were then being bred for distribution to farmers. To the newspaper reporters present, Wallace spoke of his “obsession with corn,” which Cárdenas reciprocated in “emphasizing that corn is the insubstitutable [sic] element in the diet and economic development of Mexico.”²⁹ They listened to Harrar describe the MAP’s unconventional approach to corn breeding, and Wallace recalled in his diary account of the visit that “most of the corn-belt inbred strains of corn are not adapted to Mexican conditions.”³⁰ Cárdenas was equally fascinated, and asked Dr. Atl, the renowned Mexican painter who was also a member of the tour group,



Figure 6.2. Lázaro Cárdenas, Henry A. Wallace, and Marte R. Gómez at the MAP test plots at Chapingo, September 1946. Wallace and Cárdenas’ visit, reuniting the agrarian apostles of the United States and Mexico, came at the high water-mark of the Rockefeller program’s sensitivity to the social impacts of technological change. (Archivo Hermanos Mayo, Envelope 2259, Fototeca AGN)

²⁹ “Sin agricultura, sería un fracaso la industrialización, opina Wallace,” *Excelsior*, September 8, 1946 (clipping from Cartas, 1946 – S-Z, AMRG).

³⁰ *The Reminiscences of Henry A. Wallace*, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, New York, 4942.



Figure 6.3. Cárdenas, George Harrar of the MAP, Wallace, and Gómez touring MAP corn plots at Chapingo, September 1946. Their stop in the synthetic corn plot, seen behind them, was the highlight of the guided tour. (Archivo Hermanos Mayo, Envelope 2259, Fototeca AGN)



Figure 6.4. Gómez, Cárdenas, and Wallace admiring farm machinery at MAP headquarters in Chapingo, September 1946. All three men were convinced that mechanization and other new agricultural technologies could bolster the productivity of the small-scale farms that were the byproduct of the 1930s land reform. (Archivo Hermanos Mayo, Envelope 2259, Fototeca AGN)

to “give artistic life, in a painting, to this class of crops.”³¹ After completing the MAP tour, Wallace demanded a chance to make an unannounced visit to local farmers in the region to hear their understanding of the future of Mexican agriculture. The group traveled a few miles to rural neighboring Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, and knocking on the door like any other visitor, Wallace spoke with Guadalupe Castro, an “*ejidatario* of good stock,” about the “successes and setbacks of the last harvest.” The Mexican press was deeply impressed by Wallace’s attention to the plight of the common *campesino*, claiming the visit demonstrated “his true democratic sentiments.”³²

As a symbolic demonstration of the marriage of agricultural technology and social consciousness, the September 1946 visit that Mann had planned was a powerful testament to the early motivations behind the Green Revolution. But rather than signifying a beginning, the visit marked an end. Just ten days after Wallace returned to the United States, President Truman fired him from his position as commerce secretary, after Wallace had made a speech attacking the U.S.’s demonization of the Soviet Union and unnecessary escalation of the Cold War. It would be the last political appointment that Wallace ever held. Two years later, he ran for president against Truman on a Progressive third party ticket, pledging an end to both Jim Crow segregation and the Cold War. While the campaign was a political disaster in the United States, he gained a number of vocal supporters in Mexico, as demonstrated by the various “Amigos de

³¹ “Sin agricultura, sería un fracaso la industrialización, opina Wallace,” *Excelsior*, September 8, 1946 (clipping from Cartas, 1946 – S-Z, AMRG). I do not know whether Dr. Atl followed through with this painting request or not.

³² “En México hay base para aumentar la producción de maíz,” *El Nacional*, September 8, 1946 (file N22414, Archivos Económicos, BMLT). Their visit to Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl was deeply ironic, for while it was a rural region in 1946, a generation later “Neza” would be one of the poorest urban slums of Mexico City, swollen with rural migrants fleeing an enclosure movement that was very much caused by Green Revolution agricultural technologies.

Wallace” societies chartered across the nation in 1948.³³ Nevertheless, Wallace’s public career and influence was entering its twilight by 1946, and certainly by 1948. Crowded out by the polarizing rhetoric of the Cold War, Wallace was a figure too complicated and contradictory to retain a place in the national political pantheon. By the 1950s, he was largely forgotten to the public, and even in the annals of American agriculture, his conservative successors in the USDA successfully marginalized him from their narrative of national progress.³⁴

Just as Wallace’s political relevance was waning, his Mexican companions at Chapingo that day likewise saw their careers and influence decline in the coming months. Gómez, as well as his presidential chief, were in the last weeks of their *sexenio*, and knowing Mexican political tradition, they expected to be swept fully from the political stage by their successor in December 1946. Avila Camacho retained some popularity in the last years of his term, but his moderation had made him enemies on both sides of the political spectrum. As for Cárdenas, his place in Mexico’s political memory was permanently assured, but if during the 1940 election he had played a major role in deciding the direction of the ruling party, by 1946 he was increasingly a mythical figure rather than a physical and political one. In the coming generation, homages to Cárdenas were frequent and expected, even while government dedication to the welfare of rural Mexicans was decidedly waning.

The man who would replace Avila Camacho in the presidential seat was Miguel Alemán, the first civilian head of state since the Revolution’s violent phase and a former

³³ “Estudiantes, obreros y profesionales forman la Sociedad ‘Amigos de Wallace,’” *Excelsior*, April 13, 1948 (file N22418, Archivos Económicos, BMLT).

³⁴ Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, Chapters 22 through 25. For one account of Wallace’s airbrushing out of the historical memory of the USDA, see Mary Summers, “The New Deal Farm Programs: Looking for Reconstruction in American Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000).

governor of the state of Veracruz. If the Avila Camacho years had represented a protracted negotiation of the meaning of Cardenismo and the rural transformation it had wrought, the Alemán era ushered in a “profound reversal of many central reforms of the Mexican Revolution,” in the words of historian Stephen Niblo.³⁵ In his campaign for office, Alemán was not subtle in his articulation of plans to turn away from the land reform project, declaring that continued redistribution threatened the “insecurity and consequent instability” of the agricultural sector.³⁶ During his first month in power, in December 1946, Alemán pushed through a series of dramatic reforms that revealed a clear departure from Avila Camacho’s moderation. He expanded the protections against expropriation among large landholders and provided further assistance to *pequeños propietarios*, even going so far as to amend the revolutionary sacred cow of the constitution’s Article 27, which mandated land reform. Alemán’s political party, which by 1946 had been renamed the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutionalized Revolutionary Party, PRI) was quickly growing into its new name, wherein the institutionalization of political power took precedent over any revolutionary ideology. Gómez and Cárdenas, therefore, represented the past rather than the future of Mexican politics, just as Wallace did in the United States.³⁷

In the midst of the political shake-up in Mexico City, the Rockefeller Foundation itself suffered a blow when Albert Mann, then in his late sixties, died unexpectedly in

³⁵ Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 183.

³⁶ “Cómo entiende el Lic. Miguel Alemán el problema agrario,” July 15, 1945, *Siembra* 2, no. 28.

³⁷ The Alemán years, just as most of Mexican political history in the 1940s and 1950s, are dramatically understudied, and especially few works are available in English. Tzvi Medin’s *El sexenio alemanista* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1990), Ryan M. Alexander’s “Fortunate Sons of the Mexican Revolution: Miguel Alemán and His Generation, 1920-1952,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 2011), and Stephen Niblo’s two works *Mexico in the 1940s* and *War, Diplomacy, and Development* are exclusively political studies; on the best examination of rural Mexico in this era, see Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata*.

February 1947. Less than a year after Mann had taken over directorship of the MAP in the wake of Frank Hanson's death, the program was again without a leader. In the following weeks, the Foundation's leadership seriously considered hiring another adviser who might be able to serve double duty as Mann had, overseeing the southern agricultural work of the General Education Board in addition to the MAP. Foundation trustee William Myers himself admitted that since the GEB was also looking for an agricultural chief, "there should be certain advantages to this if a man could be found who would qualify as Mann did for the two lines of work."³⁸ Ultimately, though, they were unable to find such a candidate, and it would be Warren Weaver, the head of the Foundation's Natural Sciences division, that began to exert his dominance over the Mexican program. Weaver was a mathematician who had become Natural Sciences director in 1932. However, during World War II, he had temporarily withdrawn from RF service to work in the wartime government's Office of Scientific Research and Development, and Frank Hanson had served as his interim replacement. Therefore, in the crucial years when the Mexican Agricultural Program had been proposed and conceived, Weaver had either been absent or uninterested in the program; he himself later admitted that he had "participated only in occasional discussions" of the early Mexican program. By 1946, however, when Weaver returned to lead Natural Sciences, he grew quickly convinced of the MAP's significance, but understood it as a potential Cold War tool against communist expansion, as will be detailed in the following section. With Mann's

³⁸ William Myers to Warren Weaver, March 26, 1947, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 100, Box 2, Folder 8, RAC.

death, therefore, Weaver began reasserting control over an agency that he had initially had little interest in, but whose future he would decisively impact.³⁹

Thus, just months after the carefully orchestrated visit of Wallace and Cárdenas had reflected the MAP's high water-mark in regards to its attention to the social and economic limitations that faced Mexican farmers, the future of the program looked dramatically different. Albert Mann's agenda of extension and demonstration, influenced by his long experience in the American South, was now up in the air. The political allies that the Foundation leaders had originally sided with – Gómez and Avila Camacho – were gone and the Americans were forced to negotiate with a new bureaucracy. But even more importantly, U.S.-led internationalism in the late 1940s was being rapidly drawn into the ideological contest of the escalating Cold War. As the following section will explore, it would be these geopolitical demands that had the most lasting impact on the shaping of the early Green Revolution.

Mexican Frustrations, Global Temptations

Between early 1947, with the death of Albert Mann, and 1950, when the Rockefeller Foundation first exported its Mexican rural development model to Colombia, the MAP underwent a dramatic transformation in its goals and operating philosophy. While the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican agricultural development program of 1945 or 1946 may seem foreign to scholars of the mature Green Revolution in Asia, for example, by 1950 most of the elements of that later project had become apparent within the MAP. The program's early emphasis on socially appropriate technologies and

³⁹ *The Reminiscences of Warren Weaver*, 1961, Columbia University Oral History Research Office, 655. On Weaver's career, see his autobiography, *Scene of Change: A Lifetime in American Science* (New York: Scribner's, 1970).

environmentally sound cultivation techniques was rapidly eroded in favor of a strategy that aimed to raise production as rapidly as possible, in hopes of outstripping population growth or at least fears of such growth. It would be this later developmental package, not the one of the mid-1940s, which would ultimately be exported abroad. The rest of this chapter will trace the winding and at times unlikely path taken in that reinvention.

In the aftermath of 1946, the MAP leadership's greatest concerns centered on the political transition in Mexico City and their program's uncertain place under the new regime. Exoticizing Mexican politics as feudalistic and dictated by personality rather than ideology, Harrar expected to have to justify his program anew to the political elite or find himself out in the cold. The MAP had a firm ally in Marte Gómez, who in a formal letter to his successor Nazario Ortiz Garza championed the "magnificent fruits" that the Office of Special Studies had "yielded in such a short period of time," and counseled for continued cooperation between the President and the Rockefeller Foundation.⁴⁰ But considering the instinct of Mexican presidential administrations to publicly distance themselves from their predecessors, Harrar and the New York leadership of the Foundation pursued the support of Alemán himself. They wrote a number of personal letters to the president detailing the accomplishments of their program, emphasizing their breeding of "a number of superior synthetic varieties of corn" that were then ready for multiplication and their in-depth studies of soil fertility and the value of green manures and crop rotation.⁴¹ Continuing the government's partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation, they assured, held great promise for the welfare of rural Mexico.

⁴⁰ Marte Gómez to Nazario Ortiz Garza, December 2, 1946, Secretaría de Agricultura – 1946, AMRG.

⁴¹ Warren Weaver to Miguel Alemán, and attached "Interim Report on the Mexican Agricultural Program," January 9, 1947, Miguel Alemán Valdés papers (hereafter MAV), Box 428, Folder 506.23/2, AGN.

The MAP leadership's expectations of a political shake-up following the presidential transition were not unfounded. The first surprise came in Alemán's changing of the name of the SAF to the Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería (Secretariat of Agriculture and Livestock, SAG), and his transfer of that agency's research and breeding duties to a new external bureau, the Instituto de Investigaciones Agrícolas (Institute for Agricultural Research, IIA). In essence, the IIA represented a political victory for Eduardo Limón and his mentor and cooperator Edmundo Taboada, as they were now given an autonomous home outside of the Agriculture Secretariat with potential for greater funding. The transfer also exacerbated the tensions between the Rockefeller scientists and the Mexican corn breeders now located in the IIA, as the latter agency was no longer housed under the same roof as the MAP but were still expected to cooperate with the Rockefeller institution. While Harrar and the Advisory Committee were first optimistic about the government's new-found interest in fostering research, they also saw a bureaucratic nightmare on the horizon as the MAP was now forced to negotiate with multiple federal agencies, "aggravat[ing] the problem, already a difficult one, of conducting experimental work," as Mangelsdorf observed in early 1947. The old tensions between how the corn program should be run, therefore, were nowhere closer to a resolution.⁴²

The greatest surprise in Alemán's nascent agricultural program, however, came with his announcement in January 1947 that the government would create an autonomous agency responsible for producing and distributing improved corn seed to Mexican farmers, the Comisión del Maíz (Corn Commission). Even more so than Avila Camacho,

⁴² Paul Mangelsdorf, "Report on a Trip to Mexico," February 27, 1947, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 61, RAC.

Alemán was deeply committed to boosting agricultural production, particularly the yield of corn. But if Avila Camacho had pursued higher production to prove that the *ejido* was an efficient unit of agricultural organization, Alemán was far more interested in providing cheap food to fuel urbanization and industrialization campaigns, and was much warmer to working with non-*ejidal* commercial farmers. How the Commission would function was relatively simple: it would acquire improved seed from both the MAP and the IIA, and then contract with larger, private farmers to reproduce that seed in far greater quantity, and ultimately distribute it to both *ejido* farmers and *pequeños propietarios*. With an annual budget of four million pesos, the Commission represented state intervention into the agricultural economy on an unprecedented scale.⁴³

In theory, the establishment of the Corn Commission was a fulfillment of the MAP's long-voiced desire that the government should take a more active role in both seed distribution and extension, and the Rockefeller staff was at first enthusiastic about the new agency. Indeed, when the Commission began work in the early months of 1947, it favored the synthetic seed that it was then receiving from the MAP experimental plots. A March 1947 article in *Tierra*, an official mouthpiece of the SAG, described how the Corn Commission's first harvest was composed entirely of synthetics, seeds which promised to "bring to an end the importation of this cereal, improve its quality and yield, and lower prices."⁴⁴ But in the coming months, the Commission began to reconsider the political utility of distributing synthetic seed to farmers. More than anything, this was due

⁴³ Considering its enormous impact on the Mexican countryside, Alemán's Corn Commission is a desperately understudied institution. For the few brief overviews, see Adolfo Olea-Franco, "El maíz híbrido en la agricultura," in Mechthild Rutsch and Carlos Serrano Sánchez, eds., *Ciencia en los márgenes: ensayos de historia de las ciencias en México*, (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, UNAM, 1997), Olea-Franco, "One Century of Higher Agricultural Education and Research in Mexico," 644-649, Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico*, 100-102, and Cotter, *Troubled Harvest*, 194.

⁴⁴ José E. de la Cruz, "Semilla de maíz sintético para los agricultores," *Tierra* II, no. 3 (March 1947).

to the Alemán administration's near-obsessive desire to foster enduring clientelist relationships with various sectors of society. Historians and social scientists, studying how the PRI constructed its legitimacy and power during the post-1940 era, have highlighted the importance of patron-client relationships in binding various social groups to the ruling party through the expectations of patronage, services, and preferential treatment.⁴⁵

Agriculture was no exception, and both the SAG and Corn Commission wanted to reap the political benefits that the distribution of improved corn offered. When small private commercial firms, few of them adequately trained in corn breeding, began to advertise the “magical” benefits of hybrids and synthetics – sometimes not even distinguishing between the two – state officials grew anxious. One SAG chief worried in July 1947 that “unscrupulous commercial interests who see lucrative ends in presenting to farmers ‘miraculous’ results in whatever climate, soil, or conditions” would foster a “marked confusion among the public about the true value” of such seeds.⁴⁶ Second, and most importantly, state representatives feared that if private firms received the credit for instigating a revolution in yields, the PRI would miss a major political opportunity. In weighing between synthetic and double-cross hybrid varieties, therefore, the Corn Commission saw corn breeding through a very different lens than the MAP. Synthetics, which would be distributed to farmers once and could be replanted indefinitely, were far less useful in fostering a dependent relationship between corn farmers and the federal

⁴⁵ See, for example, S. Kaufmann Purcell, “Mexico: Clientelism, Corporatism and Political Stability,” in S.N. Eisenstadt and René Lemarchand, eds., *Political Clientelism, Patronage, and Development*, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), and Kevin Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ Salvador Sánchez Colín to Edmundo Taboada Ramírez, July 28, 1947, Records of the Secretaría de Agricultura y Recursos Hidráulicos, Grupo 215 (hereafter SARH), Dirección General Agricultura y Ganadería, Box 241, Folder 5218, AGN.

government. Double-cross hybrids, however, required annual replenishing and were a powerful tool in building rural reliance upon state largesse. “The Corn Commission pointed out to me one day,” remembered Edwin Wellhausen, the MAP’s chief corn breeder,

that what we should do was make hybrids which in advanced generations dropped very sharply so the farmers would discard them and not plant the seed, you see, advanced generation seed, and come back for new seed. Well, this would have been a mistake, because...the majority of the farmers would have continued to plant advanced generation seed, or would have given up the use of this seed rather than going back for it every year.⁴⁷

Just as U.S. seed companies had chosen double-cross hybrids to yield economic profits through yearly re-purchase, the Corn Commission likewise favored double-crosses to



Figure 6.5. President Miguel Alemán inspecting corn seed to be distributed by the Corn Commission, 1947. Alemán took an aggressive stance on the extension of improved seed to Mexican farmers, but primarily for the purpose of fostering clientelist relationships between rural people and the state. (Archivo Enrique Díaz, Delgado y García, Box 89, Sub-box 11, Fototeca AGN)

⁴⁷ Edwin Wellhausen oral history, June 1966, RFA, RG 13, RAC, 101-102.

yield political profits. But unlike the American firms who were then growing wealthy selling hybrids, neither the Corn Commission nor the SAG were prepared to successfully produce hybrid corn seed on the scales that they wanted. The MAP breeders were thus caught between a rock and a hard place. The Corn Commission, their main vehicle for reaching common farmers, was pressing them to breed hybrids that they knew would be reproduced imperfectly and might even sour farmers on the prospects of using any improved seed at all. By 1948, then, some in the MAP were beginning to see futility in transforming Mexican corn cultivation.⁴⁸

As MAP corn breeders grew increasingly frustrated with Alemán's new political apparatus in the countryside and struggled to retain their emphasis on reaching small-scale farmers, Norman Borlaug was almost single-handedly engineering a drastically different program in wheat. As mentioned earlier, Borlaug had butted heads with Harrar in 1945 and 1946 about working with private farmers in Sonora, when the latter had refused the former's requests to begin a wheat breeding program far removed from the central plateau. In the summer of 1948, that conflict came to a head when Borlaug threatened to quit the MAP unless he was given permission to begin a cooperative program in the Yaqui Valley of Sonora. Harrar held his ground, but Stakman, increasingly looking for demonstrable successes for the program, sided with Borlaug, and the wheat breeder was granted his wish. During the next two years, Borlaug reaped dramatic increases in yields planted from his rust-resistant "dwarf" wheats, especially when combined with artificial irrigation and synthetic fertilizers, which his cooperators in Sonora had easy access to. Borlaug proved to be masterful in strategizing political

⁴⁸ For the most extreme expression of frustration with the Corn Commission, see Elvin Stakman, "Report of Mexican Trip with Confidential Supplement regarding Mexican Agricultural Program," April 3, 1948, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 60, RAC.

alliances with northwestern elites, and then generating press to promote his efforts. Thus, in the last two years of the 1940s, the MAP displayed somewhat of a split personality, as the northern wheat program operated side-by-side with the central corn program, each pursuing quite different goals.⁴⁹

From the MAP's founding in 1943 until the last years of the decade, corn had attracted the majority of the program's funding and attention, and as demonstrated above, its breeding strategies were decisively shaped by its leaders' experiences in poor rural areas of the United States. In those earlier years, Borlaug and his commercially oriented wheat strategy were largely marginalized. However, between 1947 and 1950, the scales began to tip in the favor of the wheat approach. This was partially due to the frustrations that the corn program faced in the Alemán years, and that Borlaug could show off demonstrable results while the corn breeders could not, but what ultimately tipped the scales were two broader trends that resonated beyond the Rockefeller Foundation and Mexico's borders.

The first such trend was the growing popularity and proliferation of neo-Malthusian thought among American internationalists. While public intellectuals during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had periodically revived Reverend Thomas Malthus's prediction that population growth would ultimately outpace global natural resources, in the years after World War II such thinking enjoyed a dramatic resurgence. The one book which more than any other revived fears of overpopulation and the inability of the planet to provide for its inhabitants was William Vogt's *The Road to Survival*, published in 1948. Vogt was trained as an ornithologist, and had spent much of

⁴⁹ On Borlaug's fight with Harrar, see Hesser, *The Man Who Fed the World*, 52-3. For an example of Borlaug's public relations work to promote his wheat breeding program, see Norman Borlaug and J.A. Rupert, "Cómo aumentar la producción de trigo en México," *Tierra* IV, no. 7 (July 1949).

the 1930s and early 1940s working in Latin America, both with the Pan-American Union and Nelson Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs. In Mexico particularly, he observed rampant soil erosion and deforestation as *ejidatarios* received plots that were often unsuitable for agriculture. In a 1944 book that he wrote for Mexico's secretariat of education, Vogt warned that "if the policy of the man toward the earth does not change, there will be a shortage every year of corn, beans, squash, and meat." *The Road to Survival*, which dramatized and expanded the claims that Vogt had made four years earlier for Mexico, argued that mankind's exploitation of the environment, particularly through the recent war and unsustainable agriculture, ensured that future generations would run up against natural limitations in feeding and providing for themselves. Profoundly alarmist, Vogt's 1948 book predicted immeasurable suffering should humans not adopt a new relationship with the natural world.⁵⁰

Particularly within the Rockefeller Foundation, *The Road to Survival* made a deep impact. Many of the MAP's Mexican staff knew Vogt personally from his years in Mexico, and read the book eagerly in 1948. Warren Weaver wrote to Harrar that the book "does seem to present very basic problems in a forceful way," and asked that the New York office purchase multiple copies for distribution in late 1948, though "the RF cannot possibly take the position of officially sponsoring the book."⁵¹ Mangelsdorf and Bradfield admitted that Vogt's book was decidedly "gloomy," but had "a sound foundation in

⁵⁰ Quote is from "Guillermo" Vogt, *El hombre y la tierra* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1944), 11. See also William Vogt, *The Road to Survival* (New York: Sloane, 1948) and William Vogt, "A Continent Slides to Ruin," *Harper's* June 1948. For the best scholarly examination of the impact of neo-Malthusian thinking on the environmental movement and the Cold War, see Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), and Derek S. Hoff, *The State and the Stork: The Population Debate and Policy Making in US History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁵¹ Warren Weaver to George Harrar, October 4, 1948, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 3, Folder 16, RAC.

fact.”⁵² The MAP scientists’ interest in overpopulation and hunger was a rather new phenomenon, and marked a departure from their earlier understanding of rural Mexico. The Survey Commission’s 1941 report, the document that provided the blueprint for the early MAP, did not once use the word “overpopulation” and referred to “hunger” just twice, and only once in reference to food. That report had presented low rural living standards and poverty, not hunger or overpopulation, as the greatest problem facing the Mexican countryside.⁵³ Indeed, the corn shortages that did arise in 1943 and 1944 were not the product of timeless hunger, but of U.S. wartime interference in Mexican agriculture and the politicization of claims of food scarcity, and most of the Rockefeller scientists were aware of this. Therefore, when Paul Mangelsdorf would declare in 1948 that “the most critical problem which faces the world today is that of producing sufficient food to feed the world’s population,” it revealed the rhetorical transformation since the MAP’s founding. The attempt to raise the rural standard of living in Mexico, having encountered steep internal and external obstacles, gave way to a simpler emphasis on satiating hunger, whether real or imagined.⁵⁴

The second trend that drove the MAP from corn toward wheat was the deepening Cold War. After early standoffs in 1945 and 1946 between the United States and the Soviet Union in Western Europe, the arena of the Cold War expanded dramatically into the non-aligned and formerly colonized and decolonizing world, as witnessed by confrontations in Greece and Turkey. It was in these years that American policymakers

⁵² Paul Mangelsdorf and Richard Bradfield, “Report on Trip to Colombia and Other South and Central American Countries,” July 8, 1948, RFA, RG 6.13, Series 1.1, Bos 32, Folder 360, RAC.

⁵³ “Agricultural Conditions and Problems in Mexico: Report of the Survey Commission of the Rockefeller Foundation,” August 1941, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 1, Folder 2, RAC.

⁵⁴ Paul Mangelsdorf and Richard Bradfield, “Report on Trip to Colombia and Other South and Central American Countries,” July 8, 1948, RFA, RG 6.13, Series 1.1, Bos 32, Folder 360, RAC.

began speaking of a “Third World,” that vast swath of humanity that was neither affiliated with the United States and Western Europe nor the Soviet bloc, and strategists in both Washington and Moscow set their sights on winning the hearts and minds of leaders and common people in these regions. The United States government sought to demonstrate to this nascent Third World that the capitalist economic system provided greater benefits than that of their socialist rival, and would in the late 1940s and early 1950s invest heavily in expanding American influence across the globe. State Department officials had long been aware of the Rockefeller Foundation’s agricultural program in Mexico, and saw in it a potentially exportable model that could be a powerful weapon in the global war on communism. The leadership of the Foundation was often quite sympathetic to such alliances: as early as 1946, Raymond Fosdick argued that “there is hardly a Latin American country where [the MAP] could not profitably go, and India and China represent wide open and almost untouched fields.”⁵⁵

Yet if the Foundation’s New York leadership was eager to transform the MAP into an exportable model for the rest of Latin America and the greater Third World, the scientific team at Chapingo realized the absurdity of attempting to do so at the time of Fosdick’s 1946 declaration. First of all, their program was tailored to the historical specificities of post-revolutionary Mexico and its unique social and political structures, hardly representing a universal model. And in 1946, they had little solid footing on which to declare their program successful. The first synthetic corn varieties were then being prepared to be released, but in such small quantities that they would not reach more than a few hundred farmers. Even the wheat program had barely scratched the surface of controlling disease or raising yields. In short, the MAP of 1946 and 1947 had effected

⁵⁵ Raymond Fosdick diary, February 7, 1946, RFA, Officer Diaries microfilm (accessed on CD), RAC.

very few changes in the daily practice of Mexican agriculture. But the overwhelming pressure to produce a universal model for immediate Cold War application was so great that the scientific team was soon forced to make Mexican concessions for the purpose of global expansion. In October 1947, at an annual MAP meeting in New York, the Advisory Committee approved plans to being investigating the possibilities of beginning an agricultural program in Colombia, as the Mexican “experiment in organization and procedure can now be accepted as a proved success.”⁵⁶ Such a confident declaration contrasted dramatically from other internal reports and correspondence of that year, in which the MAP team expressed frustration at the lack of cooperation with the Mexican government, and that the true test of the crop breeding programs had yet to come.⁵⁷

As the MAP struggled to reconcile the demands of drafting a universal blueprint for global agricultural reform and simultaneously attacking rural poverty in Mexico, the tension between the competing strategies of corn and wheat breeding would reach its final crescendo. After several years of clashing with the Corn Commission over synthetic corn varieties and then watching the government’s hybrids fail to take root among small-scale corn farmers, the project’s leaders began to reconsider their Mexican strategy. In an October 1950 Advisory Committee meeting in New York, after expressing his frustration at the failure of getting Mexican farmers to adopt improved varieties of corn, Stakman fumed that “the plant breeding job in such a country as Mexico will probably never be done.” Convincing farmers of the value of improved corn, whether synthetic or hybrid, would be impossible within the compressed time-frame now pushed upon the MAP by its

⁵⁶ “Annual Meeting of the Advisory Committee, Mexican Agricultural Program,” October 30, 1947, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 67, RAC.

⁵⁷ See “Confidential Monthly Report on the Mexican Agricultural Program for the Information of the Trustees,” October 1, 1947, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 323, Box 23, Folder 155, RAC, for one example of RF frustration with the Mexican government.

globally minded leaders. However, Stakman continued, their failure with corn should not hamper the utility of the program as a model “beyond the borders of Mexico,” especially when “it will become of tremendous importance for the United States to demonstrate that the democratic system is capable of assisting backward peoples in raising their own standards of living.” The answer, suggested Warren Weaver when Stakman had finished, lay in wheat rather than corn.⁵⁸

In hopes of creating a neater and more exportable model for other nations, the MAP leadership moved wheat from the margins to become the new flagship breeding program in Mexico. In doing so, they also began to exclude their earlier unconventional methods of reaching common farmers, beginning to focus far more on those cultivators who were better poised to implement expensive technologies. Borlaug’s northern wheat experiment station in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, which Harrar had once fought to prevent, was increasingly moved to the forefront of the MAP’s publicity campaign, and its dwarf wheats garnered more and more press each season. While synthetic corn breeding was not entirely phased out, by 1950 the MAP and IIA together made double-cross hybrids the flagship of their corn campaign. The rejection of working with poorer farmers radiated out beyond the corn-wheat dilemma to affect the whole program. In a meeting with the directors of the Bank of Mexico in 1948 to discuss credit for commercial fertilizer purchases, Harrar admitted that they preferred to work with *pequeños propietarios* over *ejidatarios* because of the latter’s “lack of agricultural preparation and their limited economic capacity,” whose problems would be of “much slower

⁵⁸ “Agenda for the Annual Meeting of the Advisory Committee for Agricultural Activities of the Rockefeller Foundation,” October 26, 1950, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 10, Folder 67, RAC.

resolution.”⁵⁹ Yet perhaps the most memorable example of the MAP’s shifting philosophy came in late 1949, when Foundation Board of Trustees member John Dickey visited Chapingo and reported his observations to the New York leadership. While Dickey was positive about the progress made, he warned that the program would soon have a “considerable impact upon the whole land-use policies of Mexico” which could “introduce fresh economic disparities within the Mexican economy, particularly the agricultural economy, which will present political problems not now even dimly perceived by many Mexicans.”⁶⁰ To prevent future problems, Dickey recommended the MAP immediately hire a team of social scientists, but Weaver was highly critical of the suggestion. Highlighting the benefits of the program’s “singleness of purpose,” Weaver sardonically likened the invitation of social scientists to asking “the foreman of a line repair crew, sent out to splice a telephone cable broken in a storm, whether he wouldn’t like to take along a couple of professors interested in the social impact of modern communications systems.”⁶¹ The MAP had an urgent and globally important task, implied Weaver, and forcing it to pause for careful study would be impertinent.

As the MAP simplified itself to facilitate global adaptability, its leaders also began the task of selectively forgetting the program’s origins and initial goals. If memories of the American South’s poor farmers and the context of *ejidal* agriculture in the wake of Cárdenas’ land reform had been crucial to the founding of the MAP, by the last years of the decade those influences were hard to detect in the Rockefeller program’s founding myth. While the early MAP had shunned publicity in both Mexico and the

⁵⁹ “Entrevista para tratar el problema de la fertilización de los suelos mexicanos,” April 15, 1948, Colección Gonzalo Robles (Grupo 248), Box 1, Folder 2, AGN.

⁶⁰ John Dickey to Warren Weaver, October 20, 1949, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 3, Folder 19, RAC.

⁶¹ Warren Weaver to John Dickey, William Myers, and Thomas Parran, November 21, 1949, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 3, Folder 19, RAC.

United States, by the 1950s it was actively seeking it out. In late 1950, the Foundation released a documentary film on the MAP, the first of several, which broadcasted the program as a potential model across the planet. In laying out the context of the Foundation's intervention, the film's narrator evoked a Mexico where timeless hunger and malnutrition stalked the land. Viewers heard no mention of Mexico's recent revolution or its dramatic experiment with *ejidal* agriculture, learning only of a backward place where "no tractor roars" and teams of oxen "slowly furrow an over-worked soil."⁶² The tensions between large and small farmers, which had so bedeviled the program's early planners, were entirely absent from the film's confident assertion that American technological assistance could solve the global question of hunger. Mexico had lost any and all geographic and historical specificity. While they knew quite well to the contrary, the Foundation's leaders themselves began to believe this argument after they had repeated it enough times. "It is something of an accident," wrote Warren Weaver in late 1950, "that this project happens to be located in Mexico. The Rockefeller Foundation wanted to try an experiment. Mexico offered a favorable location."⁶³

That the MAP's leaders began to forget the local context of Mexico and its politics did not mean that the program ceased to have an impact on Mexican politics itself. Alemán and his party were exuberant about the opportunity of providing a developmental model for other nations in Latin America and across the Third World. Indeed, Mexico's growing international prominence as a successful example of rapid agricultural development would provide a central plank in what became known as the "Mexican Miracle," or the state-driven economic growth that marked the years between

⁶² Transfilm Inc., "Revised Commentary for Film on Mexican Agricultural Program," October 24, 1950, RFA, RG 6.13, Series 1.1, Box 33, Folder 369, RAC.

⁶³ Warren Weaver to Chester Barnard, October 21, 1950, RFA, RG 1.1, Series 323, Box 3, Folder 21, RAC.

1940 and 1960. The benefits of that “miracle,” however, were not evenly divided between all sectors of Mexican society, for the Alemán administration, just as the MAP had, sought by then to serve those farmers who were best positioned to make use of new techniques and technologies. In his six years in office, Alemán pushed through an agricultural policy that would set the course for the next twenty years of state-led rural development. Government financing and credit programs to the *ejidal* sector were cut and redirected toward commercial growers of food and fiber who could provide cheap sustenance to the inhabitants of the swelling cities. Active land redistribution, which had already slowed during the Avila Camacho years, ground to a near-halt in the late 1940s. Yet perhaps most important was the state’s irrigation policy. Cárdenas and Avila Camacho had both begun the task of providing water to farmers through canal and dam construction, but Alemán rapidly accelerated it. The geography of irrigation investment, not surprisingly, reflected the class stratification in Mexican agriculture. In the years that followed, a majority of irrigation investment went to the northern wheat-growing states, particularly Sonora, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas.⁶⁴

If the reinvention of Mexican agricultural policy during the Alemán years inspired U.S. Cold Warriors and came to international prominence for its potential value as a Third World model, it brought genuine disappointment to those observers who had long hoped that Mexico might follow an alternative path to rural modernity. One such disheartened spectator was J.I. Rodale, perhaps the most vocal American champion of non-chemical agriculture at the middle of the twentieth century. Having witnessed signs

⁶⁴ On the agricultural policy of the Alemán years and the greater “Mexican Miracle,” see Hewitt de Alcántara, *Modernizing Mexican Agriculture*, Chapters 2 and 3, Steven E. Sanderson, *The Transformation of Mexican Agriculture: International Structure and the Politics of Rural Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Wright, *The Death of Ramón González*, Chapter 6.

of unsustainable agricultural practices on a Mexican trip in early 1950, Rodale felt compelled to write to the President of the dangers inherent to chemical-dependent agriculture. "I know many Mexican people and I love your country," wrote Rodale to Alemán in April of that year, and expressed his long-time interest in "your problem of agriculture...and of increasing your people's health." But "it would be a great pity," pleaded Rodale to the President, "if Mexico goes in the track of the United States in the use of chemical fertilizers." Alemán did not respond to Rodale's letter.⁶⁵

Yet perhaps the most compelling critique of Mexico at mid-century came from a figure who had devoted himself for many years to the equitable resolution of Mexican rural problems, and one familiar to readers of this dissertation: Frank Tannenbaum. During the first half of the 1940s, Tannenbaum had turned from Mexico to address questions of slavery and race in *Slave and Citizen*, his 1946 comparative history of African-descended peoples in the United States and Latin America. In traveling back to Mexico after that book's publication, however, Tannenbaum grew alarmed by what he perceived to be the Mexican state's marginalization of the redistributive politics that had engaged him so profoundly during the 1920s and 1930s. He was so disturbed by this trend that he felt compelled to write a new volume about the strange career of the Mexican Revolution. *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread*, published in 1950, marked a radical departure, as Tannenbaum's first two books had been unequivocally positive about the ruling party's stewardship of the social ideals of the Revolution. By 1950, however, that praise had nearly completely evaporated. Tannenbaum was especially damning in his criticism of the government's romance of "the ideal of bigness," as evidenced in its urban development, its massive dams, and certainly its

⁶⁵ J.I. Rodale to Miguel Alemán, April 28, 1950, MAV, Box 926, Folder 003.52(33)/3543, AGN.

agriculture. What Mexico “really needs [is] a philosophy of little things,” he claimed. The government’s reckless pursuit of industrialization and mass consumerism was placing enormous burdens upon the small rural communities, in which he saw the wellspring of the nation’s “strength and resilience.” “Any plan that would destroy the vitality of the Mexican rural community,” Tannenbaum presciently warned, “is bound to prove tragic in its consequences and repeat the slums of an earlier industrialism.” But just as Rodale had received no response from Alemán’s government, Tannenbaum’s critique too was silenced in the Mexican public sphere.⁶⁶

Tannenbaum’s hopes for the future of rural Mexico would by 1950 find little sympathy or support among the political elite in Mexico City. The leadership of the PRI, then partnered with a Cold War-minded Rockefeller Foundation, had committed itself to a rural development program that emphasized improvements in yield above all other considerations. Yet Tannenbaum’s hopes were not so different from those of the earliest pioneers of the Mexican Agricultural Program who had looked to the lessons of the American South in charting a course for Mexican progress: Josephus Daniels, John Ferrell, Henry Wallace, Albert Mann, and Paul Mangelsdorf. The transformation of their early “philosophy of little things,” to quote Tannenbaum, into the blueprint of the global high modernist Green Revolution took, as this chapter has revealed, an unscripted and unpredictable path. Some of the impetus behind that transformation had arisen from the internal rivalries within the Rockefeller Foundation, but most of the push had come from the stultifying political atmosphere that was ushered in by the Cold War, along with the

⁶⁶ Frank Tannenbaum, *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread* (New York: Knopf, 1950), 244, 243, 242, 245-246.

Mexican state's decisive turn away from aiding its poorest rural citizens. Critics of the Foundation's growing momentum toward helping only wealthier farmers would therefore find themselves out in the cold just as Tannenbaum and Rodale did.

After 1950, the Rockefeller Foundation's agricultural program began its trek further southward. In May of that year, the Colombian Agricultural Program began operation in Medellín, Colombia. In April 1955, the Chilean Agricultural Program opened its doors in Santiago. But most importantly, in 1957 the Rockefeller Foundation began a cooperative agreement to work with the government of India, establishing offices in New Delhi. By the time the Indian program began, Norman Borlaug was the Rockefeller team's star researcher, and it was his Sonoran dwarf wheats that would put down roots in the soils around New Delhi. By 1957 too, the Cold War battle for India was at high tide, and Borlaug and his Foundation colleagues worked hand-in-glove with the U.S. State Department in assuring that every Indian wheat harvest would go toward preventing a communist revolution.

From its roots in the cotton South, the Rockefeller Foundation's agricultural development program had come a long way by 1957. But ironically, the same societal aftershocks resulting from the Green Revolution in 1950s Mexico and 1960s India were also playing out in the American Cotton Belt during the same era. This dissertation's epilogue will consider how the agrarian trajectories of the U.S. South and Mexico once again intersected, as each region reaped the bitter fruits of a Green Revolution that had left behind the poor farmers with which it had begun.

EPILOGUE

THE SHARED GREEN REVOLUTION

In 1962, the three pioneers of the Rockefeller Foundation's global agricultural program, Elvin Stakman, Paul Mangelsdorf, and Richard Bradfield, returned to Mexico after several years of absence. It was more than twenty years since their first arrival to that country as members of the Rockefeller survey commission, and their 1962 return visit took on symbolic meaning. In the past decade, the three men had each traveled across the "Third World" as advisors to the Foundation, helping to inaugurate agricultural assistance programs in Colombia, Chile, India, and the Philippines, and they had captured the global spotlight in a way exceedingly rare for plant and soil scientists. In returning to Mexico they were hailed as heroes and saviors, and the Mexican government in those years even planned to mint a 25-peso coin that commemorated the Foundation's aid to Mexico. But when Stakman, Mangelsdorf, and Bradfield had a chance to tour the countryside of central Mexico that year and see the changes that had been wrought after a decade of absence, they confronted the sobering reality of what agricultural

"modernization" meant to the majority of Mexicans. Mangelsdorf remembered that

one of the things that bothered all three of us...was to see that in spite of the vast changes that had taken place throughout the country...we couldn't see that the lot of the small farmer, the *ejidatario*, had changed very much. In fact, relatively, he was worse off because his neighbors were better off, and he was standing still, economically speaking. Some of this has happened in the United States. The small farmer, especially the farmer who makes a living on a part-time job and works in a factory in a near-by town, he's not better off than he was 25 years ago. He's gradually being squeezed out of the picture. He can't afford to buy the machinery that it takes to do efficient farming today. The difference between the United

States and Mexico is that there are so many more Mexicans in that kind of situation. I don't know what the answer to that one is, either.¹

Mangelsdorf's parallel between the contemporary enclosure movements in both Mexico and the rural United States sheds light on a phenomenon that was remaking much of the global countryside in that era. Like few other of his contemporaries, the botanist connected the social and economic consequences of the Green Revolution development model in Mexico with the rural enclosure that was then well under way in the United States, particularly in its southern states. It is precisely that shared transformation in agriculture and rural life that this epilogue will explore.

In the years after 1950, in both the U.S. southern and Mexican countrysides, the Green Revolution model produced a world where farming came to be the domain of experts and corporations rather than common people, whose mules and plows were replaced by diesel tractors, six-row cultivators, and petrochemicals. Those who had formerly tilled the soil as tenants, *ejidatarios*, *peones*, and sharecroppers were painfully uprooted in the process. They would leave behind their parents' and grandparents' world during the 1950s and 1960s to swell the ghettos and shantytowns of industrializing cities, whether Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Guadalajara, or Mexico City. These twin migrations – of rural southerners to America's Northeast, Midwest, and West, and rural Mexicans to urban slums and then increasingly the United States – would dramatically reshape the society, politics, and culture of each nation. Their migratory routes and marginal lives also foreshadowed a far greater transformation that in the coming decades

¹ Paul C. Mangelsdorf oral history, Rockefeller Foundation archives (hereafter RFA), Record Group (hereafter RG) 13, November 1966, Rockefeller Archives Center, Tarrytown, New York (hereafter RAC), 110. On the Mexican government minting a coin to celebrate the Rockefeller Foundation's agricultural program in Mexico, see Joseph Cotter, *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880 - 2002* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 259.

would give birth to what the scholar Mike Davis has called a “planet of slums,” as much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America followed similar paths toward breakneck and ramshackle urbanization, fueled by Green Revolution-style rural development movements.² This epilogue will explore how and why this came to be.

The American South

While few contemporaries perceived the agricultural development program pursued in the American South after World War II as an equivalent to that then being crafted for the nascent Third World, the common ground between the two was striking. In the South, there was no formal blueprint for rural modernization engineered by any one agency, such as the Rockefeller Foundation would pioneer in Mexico. Nevertheless, the alliance between the U.S. federal government and the region’s planter elite was just as influential in crafting a transformative model for the future of agriculture and rural life. Like the Green Revolution in its mature Cold War phase, that model’s vision for rural progress had little room for small, non-commercial, and subsistence-oriented farmers.

Leading the charge to reshape the rural economy of the South were Washington bureaucrats, particularly those in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). As previous chapters demonstrated, during the late 1930s and the wartime years the USDA was a deeply divided bureau, composed both of a conservative core and an idealistic, socially conscious wing that critiqued their agency’s historic alliances with large landowners and “progressive” commercial farmers. The successes of the USDA’s liberal wing were epitomized by agencies such as the Farm Security Administration, but their critique of the southern status quo faced insurmountable obstacles. Particularly, the

² Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006).

political resistance of the region's planter elite proved to be the crucial ingredient in the dismantling of the USDA's social experimentation. In the wake of heightening tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, planters' frequent characterization of government anti-poverty programs as "communistic" or "socialist" gained political traction. Likewise, World War II's testament to the geopolitical power of U.S. agricultural abundance and food and fiber exports convinced many in Washington that the future of American agriculture lay in the consolidation of farming into fewer yet more productive units. The inhabitants of rural America came to be viewed as a pool of cheap labor for industry, rather than a wellspring of cultural stability and independence.

The cumulative effects of southern political resistance and a shifting national conversation on farm life were deeply felt within the USDA. Between 1940 and 1950, the personnel and guiding philosophy of the agency underwent a dramatic transformation. Social scientists like Arthur Raper, who embodied the agency's alternative visions of earlier years, rapidly left the USDA for careers overseas in the postwar years. Those who took their place were often men like Jamie Whitten, a Mississippi cotton planter and politician who held the chairmanship of the Agricultural Appropriations subcommittee in the House of Representatives from 1949 to 1994, serving from that post as a "shadow Secretary of Agriculture," according to the *New York Times*. Whitten had little sympathy for the small farmers and tenants who faced marginalization in the postwar years. For the rural South to become a lean and efficient producer of food and fiber, Whitten believed, it had to trim the fat represented by unproductive farmers who were unable to adapt to the changing times. Whitten was representative of a southern political elite that courted

federal assistance for large farmers but favored regional development over human development, or place over people, as historian Bruce Schulman has argued.³

Marching step in step with conservative federal bureaucrats was a generation of southern planters who reinvented themselves in the wake of the New Deal as modern, innovative agribusinessmen, rather than seigniorial landlords. No figure serves as a better example of this transformation in image than Oscar Johnston, the renowned manager of the massive Delta Pine & Land Company cotton plantation in Scott, Mississippi, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. Johnston was a native-born Mississippian who after 1927 became the general counsel of the nearly 20,000 acre land company that was owned primarily by British investors. In the first decade of his management of Delta Pine, Johnston ran the plantation as many other Delta landlords did, with a vast number of African-American tenants that provided year-round labor in exchange for housing, implements, fertilizer, and a partial share of the cotton harvest. Yet in navigating the currents of New Deal federal largesse as an adviser to the USDA's Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), Johnston quickly learned that with government aid, planters could reshape the social dynamics of cotton culture in a way even more favorable to landowners. Particularly, Johnston and many others in his class believed that the old compromise of sharecropping was the primary obstacle to a modernized and efficient southern agriculture. By World War II, Johnston was envisioning a cotton plantation where sharecroppers were a thing of the past, and the work of planting and

³ Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), especially Chapter 8. On the contrast between Whitten and Raper, see Mary Summers, "The New Deal Farm Programs: Looking for Reconstruction in American Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000) and Jess Gilbert, "Agrarian Intellectuals in a Democratizing State: A Collective Biography of USDA Leaders in the Intended New Deal," in Catherine M. Stock and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). Quote is from "Jamie Whitten, Who Served 53 Years in House, Dies at 85," *New York Times*, September 10, 1995.

harvesting was done by machines and a small seasonal force of wage laborers. During the 1940s, Delta Pine began experimenting with mechanical and chemical solutions to realize this vision, and many observed it as a laboratory of the rural South's future.⁴

However, cotton's transition from a labor-intensive crop defined by sharecropping to a capital-intensive crop grown with wage labor took no smooth or predictable path. In contrast to contemporary pundits who saw mechanization as bringing an inevitable end to the system of tenancy that had been cobbled together after the Civil War, the transformation of cotton culture was far more the product of power politics than technological determinism. The machine that prompted the first forecasts of the old system's demise was the tractor, which was increasingly seen in the Cotton Belt during the 1930s. But while the tractor's potential for transforming cotton culture was highly publicized in that decade, few planters saw reason to invest in expensive and risky technologies when rural black and white labor remained cheap and available. Only the largest plantations like Delta Pine, which reaped the greatest benefits from government commodity programs like AAA, would purchase tractors. Even then, the tractor did not make sharecroppers redundant, but was just the first step in converting them into seasonal wage workers. Tractors might facilitate the process of plowing and planting, but planters still required stoop labor for weeding and picking the crop. While popular contemporary accounts like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* depicted a world of small farmers and tenants dramatically uprooted by the invasion of these "snub-nosed monsters," in the

⁴ On Johnston and the Delta Pine and Land Company Plantation, see Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999) and Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), especially Chapter 11.

Cotton Belt of the 1930s and 1940s tractors often worked side-by-side with current or former sharecroppers.⁵

Far more important than the arrival of the tractor was that of the mechanical cotton picker, which promised to eliminate the vast human labor demand between every August through October, when the cotton crop was harvested. The first effective picker was pioneered by the Arkansas brothers John and Mack Rust, who secured a patent for their machine in 1933. The brothers, however, who had leftist political sympathies and feared the damage that their machine could inflict on marginal rural people in the Cotton Belt, were reluctant to partner with the interests of large planters. Such a position hampered their ability to develop and manufacture their machine, but other engineers had fewer qualms in crafting and selling a device that was tailored to the wants and needs of landowners. Working in partnership with federally funded researchers at places like the Stoneville Agricultural Experiment Station in the Mississippi Delta, the agricultural machinery giants International Harvester and Allis-Chalmers built on the Rust brothers' schematic to produce practical harvesters that they began marketing by the end of World War II. While the first major sales of the pickers went to large irrigated cotton farms in California, by the late 1940s the mechanization of the cotton harvest was knocking on the South's door.⁶

Historians have devoted considerable ink to the question of what came first: the mechanization of southern cotton culture or the outmigration of former tenants, and

⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, quoted in Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 125. My understanding of the slow mechanization of cotton is a product of Aiken's book, along with Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865 - 1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), and George B. Ellenberg, *Mule South to Tractor South: Mules, Machines, and the Transformation of the Cotton South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

⁶ Daniels, *Breaking the Land*, 245-250, Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South*, Chapter Four.

which process deserves causal weight. While many observers of the era blamed landowners for forcing poor farmers from the land with machinery that made them redundant, planters frequently defended their investment into labor-saving technologies by arguing that they were only doing so in response to labor shortages and outmigration. Ultimately, both sides were partially correct. Earlier outmigrations of rural labor had been prompted more by pull than push factors, such as the “Great Migration” of southern blacks during World War I, and planters were not wrong in acknowledging that the labor demands of World War II lured many former sharecroppers away from cotton farming. Yet both then and in the future, planters’ imagination of a labor shortage was due primarily to the stubbornly low wages they offered, and such shortages would likely have disappeared had pay scales improved. Despite their paternalist posturing, few planters gave much thought to the fates of those who had once worked their soil.⁷

Nevertheless, tractors and mechanical cotton pickers alone did not incite a revolution in the cultivation of cotton. Those machines cut labor demands in the planting and harvesting stages, but did little to aid in the process of weeding – or “chopping” – cotton, which occupied tenants and croppers in the late spring and early summer. As long as planters required a large labor force for even a single stage of the growing process, they could not completely do away with the moral economies that had sustained the relationship between labor and landowner since the Civil War. It was only in the early 1950s that planters put the final piece of the puzzle into place, and it would be chemical innovation, rather than mechanical, that put the finishing touches on the destruction of the old mode of southern cotton farming. During each of the World Wars, the American

⁷ See Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), Chapter 8, for the best overview of this debate.

chemical industry underwent periods of rapid ferment, as its coffers grew heavy with federal funds. After each war, technologies designed to kill human beings were rapidly turned to the purpose of killing insects and weeds. Historians commonly designate DDT as the most influential chemical by-product of the Second World War, but in the cotton South it was not an insecticide that transformed rural life, but an herbicide: 2,4-D. Applied in spray or dust form, 2,4-D stimulated growth in plants to such an extreme degree that the plant ultimately grew itself to death. In cotton cultivation, the chemical was used as a pre-emergent herbicide, sprayed on plowed fields to kill any weeds before cotton seed was planted. Marketed as a miracle weed killer that was entirely safe to humans and animals, 2,4-D was the first of many pesticides that would increasingly soak the rural South in the postwar years.⁸

Therefore, by the early years of the 1950s, and due in large part to their long partnership with federal agricultural researchers and bureaucrats, southern planters had in their hands all the cards necessary to engineer a vast reformulation of cotton culture. Their reliance on sharecropping and even African-American labor, which was then showing signs of organization and resistance, was the planters' first target. Utilizing machines and chemicals to wage economic war against their former tenants, southern landowners and their allies in government literally pushed to dehumanize agriculture. The transformation that remade the Cotton Belt in the years that followed was dizzying. The

⁸ On the links between the American chemical industry and world war, see Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and David Kinkela, *DDT and the American Century: Global Health, Environmental Politics, and the Pesticide That Changed the World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). On the revolution wrought by herbicides in southern cotton culture, see Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press in cooperation with the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, 2000), Chapter 4, and Pete Daniel, *Toxic Drift: Pesticides and Health in the Post-World War II South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

cropper shacks that had dotted the southern landscape for generations were abandoned to decay, and the neoplantations that took their place resembled the antebellum plantation but far exceeded it in terms of centralization and organization. It would be machine sheds and chemical tanks that surrounded the Big House in the 1950s and 1960s, rather than slave quarters. That rural transformation was a campaign of profound social violence, and unlike what would later happen in Mexico and the greater Third World, in the American South of the 1950s there was little rhetorical posturing toward societal uplift in the campaign to “modernize” agriculture. Poverty was hardly minimized by the campaign, but merely evicted from the Cotton Belt.⁹

The exportation of rural poverty from the Cotton Belt was the most visible element in the largest and most important internal human migration in the history of the twentieth century United States, wherein millions of rural refugees fled the South in the postwar years for the slums and ghettos of industrial cities in the North, West, and Midwest. Admittedly, this was not the first southern mass migration. The flight of African-Americans northward in pursuit of industrial jobs in the 1910s and 1920s had reached dramatic proportions as well, and transformations in the midwestern Corn Belt were likewise creating rural refugees in the postwar era. However, the sheer scale of the post-1945 southern enclosure outstripped any other earlier migration in the region or elsewhere in the nation. During the 1940s through 1960s, more than eleven and a half million southerners left the region, of which about a third were African-Americans. Depending on their location within the South, migrants found new homes in California,

⁹ I borrow the term neoplantation from a contemporary account of the southern enclosure, Merle Prunty Jr.’s “The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation,” *Geographical Review* 45 (October 1955). On the spatial reorganization of the cotton plantation that was born of mechanization and chemicalization, see Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South*, 109-113.

Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and New York. Rural migrants swelled the black ghettos of Los Angeles and Detroit and white “hillbilly” districts in Ohio and Illinois, following chain migrations not unlike the pattern of European arrivals two generations earlier. While those that fled the South during the World War II years often found lucrative work in the booming wartime industries, those who left in the late 1950s and 1960s as a product of agricultural transformations found little to ease the difficult transition between two drastically different societies.¹⁰

As James Gregory and Isabel Wilkerson have detailed in two recent and compelling accounts, the southern diaspora of whites and blacks dramatically remade the entire country. Urban slum districts across the nation sagged with the weight of the new rural migrants, and it was only the New Deal’s lingering safety nets that kept these ghettos from resembling the shantytowns of later migrant metropolises like Mexico City, São Paulo, or Mumbai. The practice of urban politics was deeply impacted by the migrants, many of whom had been disfranchised for generations and demanded inclusion. When frustrations mounted in the most marginalized black communities, fiery riots erupted during the late 1960s. Responding to the influx of migrant poverty into the city’s core, affluent whites fled the city for the suburbs in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Atlanta, and the geography of the American city was dramatically reshaped. Yet not all the consequences of the great southern outmigration were negative or marked by social strife. New syncretic cultural forms were born of the blending of rural and regional traditions with urban diversity: rock and roll, country music, rhythm and blues, and other popular musical forms can each trace their legacy and roots to the southern outmigration. Fried

¹⁰ Statistic is from James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15.

chicken, NASCAR, deer hunting, and college football became national rather than regional cultures.¹¹

For those who remained behind in the rural South, the agricultural transformations of the postwar years yielded a world dramatically tilted in the favor of the white, wealthy, and landed. Reorganized planter power proved a formidable opponent as black southerners returning from military service targeted Jim Crow segregation. Geographer Clyde Woods has been one of the few scholars to link the anti-revolutionary political goals of the Cold War Green Revolution to the agricultural transformations of the Civil Rights-era South. To Woods, the mechanization and chemicalization of cotton culture in the Mississippi Delta was waged to erode the economic foundation of black Mississippians and minimize their organizing and bargaining power. Woods documents the close cooperation in that state between agribusiness collectives like the National Cotton Council and reactionary white supremacist groups such as the Citizens' Councils, as both hoped that the exodus of black southerners would minimize tension in majority-black areas like the Delta. While Woods' argument is largely conjectural and would have benefit from deeper historical research, he is correct that historians of black civil rights have not sufficiently placed that movement in the context of rural enclosures and regional outmigration.¹²

¹¹ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*; Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010). While both Gregory and Wilkerson's books are important reinterpretations, neither book does a very good job in linking outmigration with agricultural transformations of the postwar era; the word "agriculture" appears in the index of neither book. For an older popular account of the cultural and political transformations of the period, see John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Press, 1974).

¹² See Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998), especially Chapters 6 and 7. James Cobb has also argued that the expulsion of blacks was a key goal of Mississippi elites during the Civil Rights era; see *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

The working lives of those who remained in southern agriculture came to be defined by tedium, monotony, and an increasingly dangerous workplace. While rural labor in the pre-mechanized Cotton Belt was rarely fulfilling, it was embedded within a folk culture that valorized hard physical labor and granted a moral superiority to those who did the basic societal work of food and fiber production. In earlier years, tight-knit communities had provided safety nets for black and white rural dwellers, and poor people also had some success in exploiting landlord paternalism for their benefit. With the advent of the neoplantation, however, much of this earlier world was lost. Outmigration stretched and then snapped the bonds of communal cohesion, and the reciprocal culture of rural cooperation gave way to a new individualism. Substance abuse often filled the void, first with alcohol and then later with synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine. Those southerners who remained in the fields were increasingly exposed to poisons whose effects were either unknown or concealed by both producers and purchasers. Among the shrinking smallholder class that retained its lands through the postwar changes, the necessity of competing with or catering to the largest producers often brought crushing debt and bankruptcy. This was most apparent in the poultry industry, the one industry that was often held up as the most prominent example of southern agricultural success in the wake of cotton's decline. While producing great wealth for the conglomerates that vertically integrated the industry during the 1950s and 1960s, for both small landowners who raised birds and the rural migrants who staffed processing plants, poultry yielded little more than low wages, lost fingers, and staggering debt.¹³

¹³ On the broader cultural implications of the South's agricultural transformations, see Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, Chapter 14, and Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, Epilogue. On the poultry industry as an example of the uneven development of the region's postwar agriculture, see Steve Striffler, *Chicken: The Dangerous*

Ultimately, the rural enclosure movement that reshaped the American South after World War II was more dramatic in its scale and rapidity than any other previous transformation of the sort in U.S. history. However, if it had little precedent in America, it served as a premonition for future transformations beyond the United States. The strategy of uprooting poor rural people by technological change and political force for the purpose of urbanization and industrialization would hardly come to an end in the American South. As Green Revolution planners simplified the rural development model that they had first tested in the United States and exported it abroad, the experience of the Cotton Belt would foreshadow what would come to pass for hundreds of millions of rural people across the planet.

Mexico

In the years after 1950, Mexico rose to prominence among the nations of the non-communist world as a shining example of what capitalist “development” could accomplish in a relatively short period of time. In the United States, Europe, and beyond, the “Mexican Miracle” was employed ubiquitously and tirelessly to justify First World technical and economic assistance to the Third World. The leaders of the Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) boasted on the international stage of their nation’s rising gross domestic product, booming urban industries, food self-sufficiency, and improving standard of living. Driving those changes, international development planners agreed, was the “modernization” of Mexico’s countryside. Tractors were

Transformation of America's Favorite Food (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) and Monica Richmond Gisolfi, “From Cotton Farmers to Poultry Growers: The Rise of Industrial Agriculture in Upcountry Georgia, 1914 - 1960” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2007). For an example of another crop, see Tore C. Olsson, “Peeling Back the Layers: Vidalia Onions and the Making of a Global Agribusiness,” *Enterprise & Society* 13, no. 4 (December 2012).

replacing mules, herbicides replacing hoes, fertilizer replacing dung and compost, and prolific hybrids replacing local, low-yielding plant varieties. In the early and heady days of Western-led development abroad, to many observers the example of Mexico promised a bright future for the yearning masses of the Global South.

At home, the PRI boasted of the same accomplishments, but clothed their narrative of national progress in the rhetoric of the Mexican Revolution, which they continued to rely upon for political legitimacy. Rural modernization, urban growth, and industrial expansion, party leaders claimed, were not the product of development models drafted in New York, but were the organic result of a social revolution: it was Zapata, Cárdenas, and Villa that guided Mexico's progress, not Walt Rostow or the Rockefeller Foundation. But as the byproducts and social consequences of that development model became apparent during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the Mexican countryside, it was increasingly difficult to reconcile official rhetoric with observable reality. Rather than blossoming, the *ejido* was clearly under siege by larger private farmers and their allies in government; likewise, the vast majority of *campesinos* found neither the stability nor the independence that Zapata had famously fought for. At its core, the rural development program employed during the 1950s and 1960s in Mexico was effectively a counter-revolutionary project. But just as was true in the American South, the trajectory of rural change was much more a product of political economy than inevitable technological determinism. This last section of the epilogue will examine the motivations and technopolitical ingredients behind this transformation.

At the helm of Mexico's rural "modernization" project was a diverse array of actors. Foremost was the political elite of the PRI, a group that after Miguel Alemán's

presidency of 1946-1952 was largely defined by its nonparticipation in the Mexican Revolution and coming-of-age after the violence of the 1910s. While they hailed from diverse regional and socioeconomic backgrounds, there were few *campesinos* represented among this political ruling class. Joining them at the fore of the Mexican ship of state was a legion of foreign advisers, members of an international class of technocrats largely trained in the United States and Western Europe. With their deep investments in Mexico, the Rockefeller Foundation was perhaps the most dominant of these groups, but as the Cold War intensified they would be one among many, joined by the Ford Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Lastly, playing a crucial role in guiding Mexican rural development were multinational corporations specializing in agriculture, such as International Harvester and Dow Chemical, which were often based in the United States. During the quarter-century after 1950, those three groups – state elites, foreign technical advisers, and international business interests – joined together to craft a blueprint for rural Mexico that would have far-reaching consequences.

The first ingredient in the Mexican agricultural modernization project was irrigation. As a nation wherein water scarcity was common, the distribution of water was of equal importance to the distribution of land, but had largely been neglected during the political frenzy of the Cárdenas era. It was in the 1940s that the revolutionary state began a coordinated effort to harness Mexican rivers for power and irrigation, pouring millions of pesos into vast dam construction projects. Yet because of Mexico's segmented geography, the decision of where to place these dams would be of profound importance. Ultimately, it was the Mexican north, and particularly the northwest, that benefited most

from federal largesse in water management. Between 1941 and 1970, the six northern border states plus coastal Sinaloa received more than 55 percent of all state irrigation spending, despite having a far smaller percentage of the country's population. While the north seems an obvious target of irrigation campaigns, because of its higher levels of aridity than central and southern Mexico, spending decisions had more to do with the lingering political clout of the northern states than it did with environmental necessities. It was particularly the large-scale wheat farmers of Sonora and Sinaloa – the same ones cooperating with Rockefeller scientist Norman Borlaug on dwarf wheat breeding – that had the greatest success in soliciting state aid. State spending on irrigation, therefore, tended to benefit the haves rather than the have-nots, and favored wheat-growers over corn-growers.¹⁴

State extension of credit was of equal importance in fostering certain types of agriculture over others. Acknowledging that credit was a fundamental necessity for agricultural growth, the Sonoran leadership of the revolutionary state had created the National Bank of Agricultural Credit (BNCA) during the 1920s to extend low-interest loans to small producers. Predictably, that institution catered largely to the sorts of commercially minded, export-oriented farmers that were familiar in the northern states. To correct this imbalance, Cárdenas had created an alternative lending bureau in 1936 – the National Bank of Ejidal Credit (BNCE) –that dealt exclusively with land reform beneficiaries. Both banks continued to provide loans throughout the 1940s and 1950s, but

¹⁴ Irrigation statistic is from Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara, *Modernizing Mexican Agriculture: Socioeconomic Implications of Technological Change, 1940 - 1970* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1976), 18. For the best examinations of water and politics in post-1940 Mexico, see Mikael Wolfe, "Water and Revolution: The Politics, Ecology and Technology of Agrarian Reform in 'La Laguna,' Mexico" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2009) and Sterling Evans, *Damming Sonora: An Environmental and Transnational History of Water, Agriculture, and Society in Northwest Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, forthcoming).

the BNCA grew at a much faster rate than its *ejidal* equivalent, reflecting the political clout of domestic agribusiness. But even as the BNCA was outstripping the BNCE, both institutions were overshadowed by the role of private credit in funding agricultural lending. As the PRI relaxed the regulations on foreign capital imposed since the Díaz era, American banks became major players in the Mexican financial sector, and were far less interested in underwriting the revolutionary state's social experiments. By 1964, private lending represented 64 percent of the national total, and private banks overwhelmingly favored "safer" investments in large-scale agribusinesses.¹⁵

The third and perhaps most crucial ingredient was state subsidization and promotion of the physical implements of postwar agricultural technology, particularly machinery, seeds, and petrochemicals. President Avila Camacho had begun the push to provide low-cost tractors and plows to Mexican farmers during the 1940s, but had been stymied by wartime shortages. Alemán and his successors, cultivating alliances with U.S. manufacturers, escalated that earlier push first by subsidizing imports and then by fostering a domestic agricultural machinery industry pioneered by American firms like John Deere and Allis-Chalmers. State production and distribution of improved seed began in earnest in the last years of the 1940s. With the Rockefeller Foundation's experiment with synthetic varieties coming to an end by the beginning of the 1950s, nearly all of the corn and wheat seed distributed by the federal government required annual repurchasing, tailored to the minority of farmers who had access to cash and

¹⁵ Private lending statistic is from Hewitt de Alcántara, *Modernizing Mexican Agriculture*, 55. On the role of credit in post-1940 rural Mexico, see Bruce H. Jennings, *Foundations of International Agricultural Research: Science and Politics in Mexican Agriculture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), Roger L. Ransom and Kerry Ann Odell, "Land and Credit: Some Historical Parallels between Mexico and the American South," *Agricultural History* 60, no. 1 (1986), and Nicole Mottier's forthcoming University of Chicago dissertation.

capital. But it was perhaps with chemicals that the agricultural arena was most quickly transformed. With the alternative visions of the 1940s excluded, Mexican and American scientists together championed an agriculture entirely dependent on petrochemicals to kill weeds and insects and restore fertility. As Angus Wright has observed, “science originally won its intellectual prestige through the rejection of the idea of miracles,” but in the highly politicized atmosphere of the Cold War Green Revolution, agronomists and their state allies “found the rules of scientific reasoning inconvenient,” embracing the trope of the “miracle” to popularize agricultural chemicals. Such campaigns were undeniably successful. In 1950, Mexican farmers used 14,000 tons of insecticides; just a decade later that number had reached nearly 115,000 tons.¹⁶

The combination of state-funded irrigation, rural credit regulation, and the cultivation of a technical and chemical agricultural ideal proved to be a potent cocktail, and would have profound impacts on rural Mexico in the quarter-century after 1950. The “Mexican Miracle” in agricultural production was particularly felt in states like Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California, where yields dramatically increased over a relatively short period of time. Wheat, whose cultivation and consumption had long been overshadowed by corn, came to occupy an increasingly important place in the Mexican diet. Between 1950 and 1970, wheat production rose from 300,000 to 2.6 million tons. Corn yields increased at a far slower rate than that of wheat, as fewer farmers were able to take advantage of new technologies, and corn-growing regions outside of the North were rarely infused with the same federal spending on irrigation and credit extension.

¹⁶ Angus Wright, *The Death of Ramón González: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 279. Pesticide statistic is from Hewitt de Alcántara, *Modernizing Mexican Agriculture*, 85. On the role of religiously derived narratives in popularizing agricultural technology, see also Nick Cullather, “Miracles of Modernization: The Green Revolution and the Apotheosis of Technology,” *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 2 (2004).

Therefore, especially in cities, where the upwardly mobile middle classes looked with disdain upon the corn-based *campesino* diet, the wheat *bolillo* (roll) began to displace the tortilla at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In the irrigated districts of the northwest, growers benefiting from recent irrigation projects also experimented with specialty vegetable production, growing peppers, tomatoes, and other truck crops for sale at high prices to expanding urban markets. Indeed, it became abundantly clear that the state's agricultural development project was aimed at urban consumers rather than rural producers.¹⁷

As *campesinos* and *ejidatarios* confronted state neglect and the increasing competition of subsidized commercial producers, the first signs of a vast rural outmigration became apparent in the countryside. Marginalized by the Green Revolution in the 1950s through 1970s, millions of rural people fled regions that they and their ancestors had inhabited for hundreds of years to seek uncertain livelihoods in booming cities. Because of its location in the densely populated, corn-growing central plateau, it was particularly Mexico City that exploded in size as a result of the rural enclosure. Yet as country people streamed into the city, they found little decent housing and few employment opportunities. Rather than colonizing the decaying inner city, as rural migrants did in the United States, *campesino* refugees to Mexico City built vast squatter villages on the hilly outskirts of the Federal District, where an informal economy in food, goods, and services provided them with meager livelihoods. By the 1980s, Mexico City was the world's largest city, but also home to some of the planet's deepest poverty.

¹⁷ On the cultural and agricultural tension between wheat and corn, and on the early roots of the vegetable industry, see Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), Chapter 5, Wright, *The Death of Ramón González*, Chapter 6, and Steven E. Sanderson, *The Transformation of Mexican Agriculture: International Structure and the Politics of Rural Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). Wheat cultivation statistic is from William Beezley and Michael Meyer, eds., *The Oxford History of Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 552.

Indeed, the history of modern Mexico City, and that of the country as a whole, cannot be understood outside of the vast rural-urban migrations of the 1950s through 1970s. Urban politics and governance were transformed by the influx. Music, film, and literature reflected the heartbreaking yet hopeful transition of rural people into rapidly expanding urban spaces: actor Mario Moreno's Cantinflas character and Pedro Infante's *ranchera* songs each immortalized the plight of transplanted and bewildered rural migrants.¹⁸

Witnessing the rural enclosure movement and the concomitant swelling of urban centers, PRI planners desperately sought to defuse a potential political crisis. As they could not provide nearly enough urban employment to support the migrants, the PRI chose cheap food as their central strategy in avoiding social and political unrest in the cities. From the 1940s through the 1980s, the state enforced a strict price cap on corn and beans, enabling the subsistence of marginal city-dwellers. However, their strategy of driving down agricultural commodity prices and subsidizing large producers only exacerbated the rural crisis and sent more people fleeing the countryside for the cities. The PRI also sought to open safety valves for those in the midst of the rural crisis. The *bracero* program, initiated in 1943 as an emergency wartime measure that would send Mexican agricultural labor to the United States, was extended indefinitely after the war. In the eyes of the PRI leadership, *braceros* would bring back modern agricultural techniques to Mexico after their time in the U.S., but the program also served to keep unemployed rural men from swelling Mexican cities. By the time the United States ended

¹⁸ On the transformation of Mexico City in the post-1940 period, see Judith Adler Hellman, *Mexican Lives* (New York: The New Press, 1994), and Jonathan Kandell, *La Capital: The Biography of Mexico City* (New York: Random House, 1988). On the cultural manifestations of rural-urban migration, see Jeffrey Pilcher, *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001) and Anne Rubenstein, "Bodies, Cities, Cinema: Pedro Infante's Death as Political Spectacle," in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*, eds. Gilbert Joseph and Anne Rubenstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

the *bracero* program in 1964, the paths blazed by government-sponsored migration would be increasingly followed by extralegal migrants. While the Mexican government in the wake of the *bracero* program's end sought to counteract the migrational pull of U.S. dollars by inviting American companies to establish roots in Mexican soil, as part of the famous *maquiladora* zone of the northern border, those opportunities were insufficient in and of themselves to dissuade border-crossings. During the 1960s and 1970s, as rural migrants realized that work in Mexican cities was hardly an economic panacea, they fled to the cities of California and Texas.¹⁹

Yet not all rural people uprooted by the technopolitical enclosure movements of the post-1950 era suffered their fate quietly, slinking off to urban slums or American cities. A tradition of rural social protest and resistance that was especially strong in central and southern Mexico fostered radical responses to the state and capital's war on the *ejido* and *campesino* stability. In Morelos, once home to Emiliano Zapata's *agrarista* rebels, Rubén Jaramillo led first a formal political campaign against Miguel Alemán's betrayal of the land reform project, and then an extralegal guerilla revolt during the 1950s. In coastal Guerrero, agrarian radicals under Lucio Cabañas took up arms to protest the government's indifference to *campesino* interests during the 1960s. Despite the historiographical myth of social peace in the 1940-1968 period, there were several instances of violent revolt against the government's modernization project. In urban and

¹⁹ On the state's subsidization of cheap food in the post-1940 era, see Enrique C. Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico: The Political Uses of Food since 1910* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000); on the *bracero* program and the migration of agricultural labor, see Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," in *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the northern *maquiladora* zone, see Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) and Melissa Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

middle-class circles, too, there erupted a critical response to the state's blind devotion to agricultural yield and efficiency. In 1964, the agronomist Jesús Uribe Ruíz published his influential *Problemas y soluciones en el desarrollo agrícola de México* (Problems and Solutions in Mexican Agricultural Development), which lambasted the Green Revolution model's "technical intoxication" and its emphasis on agricultural problems that threatened American consumers more than Mexicans, such as northern wheat rust.²⁰

During the 1970s, several national trends served to heighten the growing critique of the Mexican state's lopsided rural development program, and it was agricultural transformations in the irrigated northern districts that drew particular public outrage. If the emerging agribusinesses of that region had found it temporarily convenient to ally with the nationalist ruling party in growing cheap wheat for urban consumers, their allegiance to the state was contingent upon steady profits. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the vast neo-haciendas of the north began a steady turn away from grains toward the cultivation of forage crops such as sorghum and soybeans, fueled the explosion of a domestic livestock industry that catered to urban Mexicans' growing demand for red meat. And in Sonora and Sinaloa, the former breadbaskets of the nation and the birthplace of the Green Revolution in wheat, enterprising growers entered into the lucrative U.S. winter vegetable market, growing aesthetically flawless tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers for American urban and suburban supermarket shoppers. As land that had once fed the growing nation now fed cattle, hogs, and wealthy Americans, the

²⁰ On Jaramillo in Morelos, see Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta, 1940 - 1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); on the uprising in Guerrero, see Alex Aviña, "Insurgent Guerrero: Genaro Vázquez, Lucio Cabañas, and the Guerilla Challenge to the Postrevolutionary Mexican State, 1960-1996" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 2009). For the best analysis of Jesús Uribe Ruíz's *Problemas y soluciones en el desarrollo agrícola de México* (Mexico City: Academia Mexicana de Ciencias Agrícolas, 1964), see Cotter, *Troubled Harvest*, 255-256.

agricultural “Mexican Miracle” lost its rhetorical luster. After a long period of self-sufficiency in basic grains, by 1980 the country was again importing corn, wheat, and rice at high prices. Mexico, wrote sociologist Gustavo Esteva in 1983, had become both the “birth place and burial ground of the Green Revolution.”²¹

Internationally, the budding environmentalist movement likewise put a damper on triumphalist, chemical-based narratives of agricultural progress, whether espoused by the Rockefeller Foundation or the Mexican government. The year 1970 was one of particularly paradoxical contradictions. While it was the first year that Earth Day was celebrated, it was also the year that the Green Revolution reached its high water-mark of influence, as Norman Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to wheat breeding and the global “war on hunger.” Mexico and its development “miracle” returned to the international spotlight, even as that romantic narrative had fallen from favor at home in the wake of the 1968 student massacre in Mexico City. But because of the growing resistance to myopic chemical approaches, Borlaug received his Nobel award that year in a firestorm of controversy. When Borlaug was criticized in 1975 that his program had buried the hopes of *ejido* agriculture in Mexico, he argued that his detractors had missed the point: Mexico’s loss, however great, had been India and Pakistan’s gain, for the model developed in Mexico had been successfully transplanted in southern Asia to the great benefit of its hungry masses.²²

²¹ Gustavo Esteva, *The Struggle for Rural Mexico* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1983), 57. On the Mexican northwest’s transition away from staple grains, see Wright, *The Death of Ramón González*, Chapter 2, and Billie DeWalt, “Mexico’s Second Green Revolution: Food for Feed,” *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos* 1, no. 1 (1985). On the social and economic inequalities inherent to Mexico’s vegetable production for U.S. and Canadian consumers, see Deborah Barndt, *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

²² Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 68-9.

Borlaug's defensive response cut to the heart of the global Green Revolution. Rather than being tailored to local or even national specificities, by the 1960s that campaign favored universal models. Yet in so doing, the missteps and mistakes committed in Mexico, which themselves grew from the Foundation's earlier experiences in the American South, would be exported outward and replicated across the planet. During the 1950s and 1970s, the dramatic crop yield increases witnessed in Sonora and Sinaloa would be repeated on Indian and Pakistani wheat fields and in Vietnamese and Philippine rice paddies, prompting utopian claims that modern technology had the potential to feed the world and end chronic poverty. But just as soon as yield increases became evident, so too did the socioeconomic consequences that followed from the Green Revolution's myopic emphasis on production rather than even distribution. The painful side effects of agricultural "modernization" that were then haunting the American South and Mexico – rural enclosures and outmigration, the poisoning of the countryside, the swelling of urban slums – came to be a global phenomena. Yet despite the Green Revolution's obvious shortcomings and its ultimate inability to end either hunger or poverty, the "sheltering discourse of modernization protected it from the imputation or the memory of failure," as Nick Cullather has observed. Into the twentieth-first century, development planners across the Global North remain committed to the belief that universal technical solutions can overcome centuries of uneven historical relationships.²³

The American South and Mexico began the twentieth century on parallel agrarian trajectories. In the *fin-de-siècle* era, country people revolted against the increasing concentration of land and rural wealth in the hands of planters and *hacendados*. While

²³ Cullather, "Miracles of Modernization," 253.

neither rebellion had been successful in dramatically altering the status quo, each shifted the tone and rhetoric of the public debate over rural poverty and inequality, setting the stage for the dialogue between both regions that would follow. During the 1930s and 1940s, as agrarian leaders in both the U.S. South and Mexico responded to the apparent failure of capitalism, they came to understand their struggle as mutual, and those decades were marked by open conversation and comparison. Their collaborative vision for rural reconstruction was profoundly diverse, ranging from aggressive land reform to technocratic management, but before the end of World War II, the majority of agrarian leaders championed democratic programs that sought to overcome the bitter legacy of centuries of plantation agriculture.

The early Green Revolution, born from that transnational dialogue, was no exception, and throughout the 1940s the Rockefeller Foundation pioneered in Mexico a rural development program that was sensitive to the needs and limitations of small-scale farmers. However, the rightward turn in U.S. international and Mexican national politics forced a reevaluation of that strategy. By the middle of the 1950s, when the Rockefeller Foundation and U.S. and Mexican governments had narrowed their vision for the countryside to raising crop yields above all else, the American South and rural Mexico would again come to share parallel agrarian trajectories. During the latter half of the twentieth century, as had been the case in the late nineteenth century, the centralized and export-oriented plantation expanded in size and prominence. But if the planters and *hacendados* of the New South and Porfiriato had ensnared marginal rural people as wage workers and sharecroppers, the managers of the neoplantation of the 1950s and beyond simply evicted them, replacing their exertions with chemicals and machinery. That

transformation would not be limited to Caribbean basin, but was exported outward into the Global South as Green Revolution planners globalized their campaign.

As this dissertation has sought to explain, there was nothing inevitable or foreordained about this transformation. Rather than guided by the neutral hand of science or technology, the political defeat and economic marginalization of small-scale farmers in each region, as well as the crafting of a rural development model that boosted food production by cooperating solely with large commercial producers, were products of the gritty negotiation of politics. However, for those who championed these campaigns, the myth of technological determinism was a powerful tool in justifying their exclusion of the vast majority of rural people. But as the agrarian dialogue of the 1930s and 1940s made clear, the range of alternative visions for the future of the countryside was great.

Acknowledging the domestic roots of the Green Revolution and the importance of the American South in shaping the Rockefeller Foundation's project in Mexico particularly helps us get beyond monolithic understandings of the meaning and potential of the Western-led "development" project. Relying upon the Cotton Belt rather than the Corn Belt in imagining rural problems and their solutions, the first generation of Green Revolution planners acknowledged that the societies in which they worked were not flat planes or blank slates, but were contending with a long and difficult past of social and economic divisions. In so doing, those planners crafted a technical assistance program that was far more attuned to the realities that most rural people faced. If Cold War pressures had not excluded this sensitivity born of the American South, it is possible that we would remember the Green Revolution in a very different way, and that our rural planet might appear quite different today.

The shared rural history of the American Cotton Belt and Mexico also pushes us to acknowledge the deep historical bonds between the United States and Latin America, which are too often ignored as historians segregate their narratives within an imagined geographical dichotomy. During the 1990s, residents of the American South began to recognize that their region was quickly becoming home to tens of thousands of Latin American immigrants. In supermarkets, Wal-Marts, and poultry plants, and on city streets and country roads from North Carolina to Arkansas and Alabama, southerners curiously met and came to know their newest neighbors. In a place where few immigrants had arrived for more than a century, journalists and scholars harped on the thrilling new-ness of these encounter. A “Nuevo” New South, they claimed, had been born from a formerly black and white region. Almost overnight, the region began to recognize its interrelationship with Latin America and particularly Mexico. But as this dissertation has revealed, the bond between the American South and Mexico was hardly new. The transnational flow of workers and families might have been novel in the last years of the twentieth century, but the connections that produced those migrations were far older.

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