

From agrarian to cacique: the history of Ejido Río Laja, Dolores Hidalgo, Mexico

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Abstract: This work describes the transition from being an agrarian leader in the 1930's to a local boss in the 1950's in the XX century, and the reasons for his defeat. This case exemplifies the difficulties of the land reform in El Bajío, Mexican Lowlands, and also explains the distortion of the governmental project of ejido. I would like to contribute to the study of the agrarian reform and offer my reflection about the system of dominance by the local boss as a form of social and political relations that still exist in the Mexican countryside.

Key words: Mexican countryside, agrarian reform.

Resumen: El presente trabajo relata el tránsito de un líder agrarista en los años treinta a un cacique ejidal en la década de 1950 y las causas de su derrota. Este caso ejemplifica las dificultades del reparto agrario en el Bajío y también muestra cómo se tergiversó el proyecto gubernamental del ejido. Con este escrito quisiera contribuir al estudio del significado de la reforma agraria y ofrecer una reflexión sobre el cacicazgo como forma de relación sociopolítica todavía existente en el campo mexicano.

Palabras clave: campo mexicano, reforma agraria.

Introduction

In the north of Guanajuato the agrarian repartition under President Cárdenas faced an intense social movement that slightly earlier, with the “Cristeros”, had expressed in defense of the Catholic religion and which during the 1930’s, with the “rebels” or of the “Hill”, defended besides the private property, the hacienda and the sort of semi-feudal relations existing in there.

Back then the people from the region (as well as in other parts of central-western Mexico) had an active participation against the governmental project which was even expressed by means of weapons. Indeed, the countryside was armed; as from 1922 the State government authorized the formation of civil defenses in the municipal halls and armed groups of pawns in the haciendas;¹ during the Cristero movement and the agrarian repartition however, the landlords intensified the purchase of guns to supply the sheaves of rebels who combated the government representatives; on its own, the latter also equipped their people. In 1930, Governor Agustín Arroyo summoned the agrarians to add the State forces, he managed to concentrate 730 men and with them he fought several guerrillas.² in the years when the repartition was intense (1935-1938) and the land was given, a set of weapons was supplied and a rural defense was set, whose members became part of the Army reservoirs.

The Agrarian repartition took place amidst violence and confrontations between federal agents, supported by a peasant minority, against the different members of the regional society. It acquired a forceful and paternalist character: receiving the land as an ejido not only was a right of the peasantry that would free it from the exploitation of landlords, but an obligation, as the agrarian petitions were considered a non-waivable. Before this attitude and the opposition of hacienda owners and the few clergies still in the region, the reaction of sharecroppers and pawns in the plots was to tighten their bonds with their bosses, leave the lands which became part of the ejidos, and

¹ Sierra, Arturo, “Informe de Gobierno, 1922, Guanajuato en la voz de sus gobernantes”, in *Compilación de informes de gobierno, 1917-1991*, p. 261.

² Arroyo, Agustín, “Informe de Gobierno, 1930, Guanajuato en la voz de sus gobernantes”, in *Compilación de informes de gobierno, 1917-1991*, p. 343.

in some cases, they left their households and rancherías. Hence, the State-peasantry alliance was not fruitful and the ejidos were virtually abandoned.

From 1930 to 1940, for the Municipality of Dolores Hidalgo, 26 presidential resolutions were signed (24 for repartition and 2 for broadening), and from 1940 to 1950 other three repartition resolutions were signed, which from the 1930's were granted provisionally (45% of the currently existing ejidos). Nonetheless, by 1940 only 16 presidential resolutions had been executed and the amount of ejido owners did not surpass 220 household heads in the municipality. Along the 1940's six more resolutions came into force and surely the amount of ejido holders increased, in any case they were still a minority in the municipal context nevertheless.

From 1938 to 1958 the ejidos in Dolores Hidalgo changed from abandonment and desolation to be worked "by anyone and in any way". The idea of the ejido as a productive cell with democratic organization where the general assembly was the highest authority and its members would be the possessors of an equal territorial surface was misrepresented and a large concentration of power and resources took place, in such manner that many of the ejido owners became another agent of the exploitation of countryside workers.

Although each ejido has its specificity and in 20 years there have been rearrangements and changes in the State policy as well as in the local power, I have found diverse forms of productive organization which are divided into "white" ejidos and "ranchero" ejidos. The former were those which were executed by the end of the 1940's and which were in charge of the affected proprietors; the latter which, with different characteristics comprise the majority, were those where the president of the ejido Commissary took the role of "traditional boss" as they hired the land to the affected or to the "party" of the peasants. The ejido representative sometimes supplied yokes and seeds, in most of the cases however, forced the peasants to deliver a third of the harvest, only because of having sowed in the ejidos. After this "ranchero" style as for the modes of work and production, the figure of cacicazgo appeared, which includes sociopolitical forms of domination.

In this work I will try to illustrate how the change from an agrarian leader to an ejido cacique took place in Río Laja, one of these ejidos I have called “rancheros”.³ I will also point out how this cacicazgo was destroyed by the lack of alliances, abuse of violence and lack of recognition of its role limits. Even though it is a particular case, it was not the only in the municipality and it reflects the misinterpretation of the Zapatista motto (the land belongs to those who work it) and that of Cárdenas (defense of labor, equity and collectivism). In the exposition I am supported by materials in the Archive of the National Agrarian Registration and by interviews of oral history held with the oldest ejido owners of the place.

As an outline, Río Laja started as an ejido in 1937 with a provisional repartition; ever since and until 1952 was led and directed by Margarito Villegas and his family. Margarito (1904-1955) was a foreigner, railroad brakemen, and it is said he was appointed by Lázaro Cárdenas to make the ejido.⁴ From the rejection of the peasant to the agrarian action, the Villegas exploited the lands in Río Laja and Soledad Nueva (a neighboring ejido, executed until 1944) using hiring and sharecropping.

In the early 1950, Margarito Villegas and his family were known as the “landowners” of the ejido, which was not exceptional in the municipality back then. However his abuses of power made the government confiscate the weapons and disavow the group as a defense battalion. Río Laja experienced a crisis that ended up in the assassination of Margarito (1955), the exclusion of all the family from ejido representation and the incorporation into the ejido of a group of peasants considered synarchists.⁵ In spite of the changes, the authorities who succeeded them were not alien to being caciques, abuses of power and supply lands on sharecropping and hiring. The organization of the ejido according to the regulation and the grouping of ejido owners only became rather stable until the 1970’s.

³ I use the concept of “ejido ranchero” to pinpoint that in the ejido land some of the essential features of the haciendas were reproduced

⁴ Fernando Villegas, ejido owner (son of Margarito). Río Laja, 1998.

⁵ The National Union of synarchists was formed in León, Guanajuato in 1937. This organization defended religious freedom, the religiously constituted family and private property; it was supported by most of the rural workers in Guanajuato; at national level it peaked between 1938 and 1945.

Location

Río Laja, a former train station and the largest hamlet in the ejido; it is located at 12 km north from the Municipal head. The ejido was granted in 1942 with 3,648 ha (2000 of them without execution). Currently, it is composed of circa 187 ejido owners with a disperse residence in its 12 fractions: 147 have a Certificate of Agrarian Rights and 40 are possessors of El Mastranto fraction, which is being disputed.

Background

The part of the ejido which was executed in 1948 (1358 ha) were lands from the old La Soledad y Anexas hacienda; this hacienda belonged to Mateo and Benito Rubio and had a surface of about 14 400 hectares of lands with diverse qualities. In 1893 Ana María Galván de Urquiza bought the hacienda which was valued in 238 367 gold pesos. The new owner had other properties in Queretaro and capital invested on oil actions. In 1918 she inherited Antonio Urquiza (husband), Isabel Galván (sister) and Eladia, Concepción and Teresa Gavidia (nieces) (see the table below).⁶ Concepción, however, ceded her uncle Antonio the fraction 5 of the plot.⁷ Ever since, the property title of La Soledad was applied to the Gavidia Family and that of El Ricón (fractions 5 and 6) to Antonio Urquiza Courtier.

Division of Rincón de la Soledad (1918)

Fraction	Heir	Surface in Hectares
1	Isabel Galván de Gavidia	3,211
2	Eladia Gavidia de Cires	1,891
3	Concepción Gavidia Galván	2,574
4	Teresa Gavidia Galván	1,824
5	Concepción Gavidia Galván	2,412
6	Antonio Urquiza Courtier	2,482
Total		14,194

Source: Registro Público de la Propiedad, T. XXI, 26/11/1918; 04/05/1936. Report by Gildardo Domínguez, CAM, Río Laja, exp. 1184.

⁶ Dolores Hidalgo, Registro Público de la Propiedad, T. XXI, 26/11/1918.

⁷ 04/05/1936. Informe de Gildardo Domínguez, Comisión Agraria Mixta, Río Laja, exp. 1184.

In the diverse fractions of the hacienda maize, bean, wheat, chili, chickpea were grown and large cattle was reared; the work was done through cowboys, sharecroppers and pawns; the latter were paid from 40 to 50 cents a day.⁸

The plots La Soledad, El Rincón, El Gallinero, San Pablo, La Erre and others in the municipality were affected with agrarian applications as of 1929 by the Army Colonel Gonzalo N. Santos, who was one of the responsible to combat Cristeros in the zone. The Colonel, from San Luis Potosí, was posted in the train station of Río Laja and from here he unfolded his activities.⁹

The oldest ejido owners and other people from the municipality remember the beginning of the agrarian actions as an act of violence and imposition. They tell us: “the agrarian applications were not voluntary; they were made under orders from the Colonel who sent the administrators of the plot (El Rincón) to gather local people and noted down about a hundred; two of them (Lázaro Vidia and Eusebio Granados) who shouted “We’d rather die than receive land from the government! He simply killed them, as it was not about choosing whether being an ejido owner or not”.¹⁰

In the face of the agrarian threat, the landlords reinforced their opposition to the government both by means of supporting the Cristero sheaves (and later of rebels), whom they supplied with wages, horses and weapons, and by the fractioning their properties. In spite of the sales, actual or fictitious, the lands of La Soledad were affected by the government to make the ejidos Río Laja and Soledad Nueva, as well as El Rincón and San José de Badillo.

Process of repartition

The application for ejido was published on the Official Newspaper of the State on April 30th, 1936. The Agrarian Particular Executive Committee (Committee) was composed of Margarito Villegas, J. Dolores Téllez and José

⁸ *Idem*.

⁹ September 28th, 1968; For the President of the Republic, from Margarito Santana, president of Comité Particular Ejecutivo Agrario de La Concepción. Exp. La Concepción 3331.

¹⁰ Santiago Pérez (Born in 1913) ejido owner, 2002; this occurrence was widely known and, in fact, told by several informants.

Jaramillo. The census (04/May/1936) stated that Río Laja was a settlement where there was a train station which communicated Mexico City with Nuevo Laredo. The locality had 743 inhabitants, out of them 109 household heads and 210 trained in agrarian subjects.¹¹

On June 28th 1937 the Joint Agrarian Commission (JAC) proposed that the 210 inhabitants were granted the 3 684 ha (215 irrigated, 1 258 seasonal and 2 211 rangeland) taken from diverse fractions of the ex-haciendas Rincón de Abasolo, Soledad Nueva and Trancas:

La Salud, of Cipriano Barrientos:	116 has seasonal;
Fr. 2 and 3 of Rincón de la Soledad,	157 has (71 irrigated and 86 seasonal)
Of Eladia and Concepción Gavidia de Cires	
Terrains of Ángela Alday de García:	10 has irrigated
Fr. F. de S. J. de Badillo, P. Padrón	100 has irrigated
El Monumento, of Emilio García:	28 has seasonal
T. Concepción González de Palafox:	340 has (280 seasonal and 60 rangeland)
T. of Antonio Urquiza:	235 has (212 seasonal and 23 rangeland)
T. of Eustacio y Porfirio Araiza:	80 has seasonal
T. of Ma Isabel de Gavidia:	456 has seasonal
T. of Josefina Ramírez de González:	34 has seasonal
T. of Dionisia Soto:	128 has rangeland
Hacienda de Trancas, Manuel Azanza	2000 has rangeland

The governor signed the proposal (11/August/1937) and Cárdenas accepted it in the same terms (13/November/1940) publishing the resolution in the Official Newspaper of the Federation on January 9th 1942.¹² This sort of repartition made a vast ejido, with nine fractions which comprised several population centers.

Dynamic of the ejido

Life in the ejido began in 1937 when 1 684 hectares were give in a provisional manner; the lands which affected Hacienda Trancas (2000 ha) were not given, as it was one of the strong opposition points considered a “rebel headquarter” and the petitioners did not move there since there were no guarantees.¹³

¹¹ Resolución Presidencial del ejido Río Laja, DOF 09/01/1942; 04/05/1936. Report by Gildardo Domínguez, CAM, Río Laja, dot., exp. 1184.

¹² *Idem*.

¹³ July 15th 1937, Report by Ignacio Rivera, supervisor of Brigada Agraria, Northern zone. Río Laja, exp. 1184.

On the formation of the ejido we were told: “back then no one wanted to get in for fears of the rebels, everyone was scared. J. Dolores Téllez and José Jaramillo (members of the committee) took the side of the bosses, so only Margarito Villegas, accompanied by his three sons and other eight men, decided to seize the lands. To complete the 20 peasants required to integrate the ejido, Don Margarito paid the local peasants and it was so that the new authorities were appointed”.¹⁴ The ejido Commissary (EC) was composed of Margarito Villegas, Erasmo Huerta and Crescencio Rayas, and the Vigilance Committee was composed of Miguel González, Everardo Hernández and José Cruz.¹⁵ The government supplied the group of 12 titleholders and alternates with shotguns to defend themselves and integrate a detachment to protect the railways. This group became part of the 25th Defense Battalion of the National Army.

The “rebels” did not come near the population fearing an encounter with the military defense; one day they reached the Calvario (one kilometer away), but they did not attack because the ejido owners, with their families, managed to flee and take cover in the small city of Dolores.¹⁶ There were agrarians from Río Laja who died or were wounded because they fought in the zone of San Diego de la Unión or in San Luis de la Paz, and those places were closely guarded by the rebels.¹⁷

The Rural Defense was very active in the supportive areas for the agrarian tasks in the country; there were abuses nonetheless: the peasants who did not take the ejido were despised and mistreated, there were even two assassinations.¹⁸ In 1939, Leobardo Rodríguez and Pedro Álvarez (EC replacers and members of the Rural Defense) were accused that “armed and disguising as rebels, they attacked La Tinaja and robbed peasants from blankets, money and other goods... the neighbors followed the bandits to Río Laja and there they were caught with the loot and taken to the municipal authorities”.¹⁹

¹⁴ Fernando Villegas, 1998.

¹⁵ August, 25th 1937, Acta de elección de autoridades ejidales. Río Laja, exp. 1184

¹⁶ Fernando Villegas, ejido owner, 1995.

¹⁷ Micaela Villegas Rodríguez, Born in 1909, ejido owner from Río Laja, 1998.

¹⁸ *Idem.*

¹⁹ April 10th 1939; for Ministerio Público from Manuel García, delegate of Promoción Ejidal 10-1, exp. 1184.

By 1937-1938 Río Laja was an ejido whose lands were “abandoned in the juridical order” as many others in the municipality; in order to cultivate the lands, the governmental functionaries tried to convince the peasants to join the ejido regime; however, given their resistance, they opted to hire the land to the affected proprietors who were indeed followed by the sharecroppers. With the obtained product there was a Fund for Ejido Promotion, which was administrated by a group of authorities from several ejidos and a regional delegate from the Agrarian Department. With the money some bank payments were made, yokes for the ejido owners and a truck for the Tequisquiapan ejido were bought.²⁰ After the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, this cooperative fund ceased working, but the permissions to exploit the ejido land continued. With the money from hiring the bank debts and taxes were paid, and a share was given to the agrarian promoter or, it was simply taken by those who controlled the production.

In Río Laja, as of 1938, the fractions of El Lindero, Los Arcos (with Eustacio Araíza, the affected owner), El Perico (with Miguel Soto) and Jiricuiche had been worked in hiring; out the product of the lands, three parts were made: one for the worker, other for the one who provided the seeds and yoke, and last for the EC which provided the land. According to tales, in each fraction Margarito had delegates, for instance “in El Lindero it was Darío Rodríguez, and in Los Arcos, they were Marcos Jante and Cruz Arredondo [...] they took trucks of maize and bean to be delivered to the Ejido Commissary”.²¹

From 1938 to 1943, Don Margarito also appropriated the third part of the production of Soledad Nueva ejido which borders with Río Laja and which was not executed yet. In the exploitation of Soledad Nueva, Teresa Gavidia was also involved (affected proprietor), who received another third part from supporting the peasants with yokes and seeds.²²

²⁰ February 2nd 1938. To Ricardo Acosta, delegate from Santiago García, delegate of Promoción Ejidal 10-1. Tequisquiapan File, 1059.

²¹ Various ejido owners from Río Laja: Lino Ordaz (born in 1915), Eulalio Ordaz Bocanegra (born in 1917), Rafael Villegas (born in 1925), Río Laja, 1998.

²² May 13th 1939. To Enrique Teuffer, delegate of Departamento Agrario, from Rodrigo Sánchez, Chieftain of the IV zone of Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal. Tequisquiapan, exp. 1142; 18/09/1944 For the Delegate, from Canuto Alarcón, representative of the ejidos of Soledad Nueva, Soledad Nueva, exp. 1142.

Between 1939 and 1942, friends of Margarito Villegas were added to the ejido, people who had worked in the army or helped the government, and some other of the region who approached him. The Villegas, Mendiola, Ordaz, Bocanegra, Grifaldo and García families are distinguishable; they added around 18. All were ejido “titleholders”, since the lands were worked by the intermediaries. The most modest ejido owners were in charge of four or five sharecroppers, and the EC (Villegas family) had around 35 intermediaries and besides hired several fractions of the ejido. In those years, he had credits from the Bank of Ejido Credit which was also controlled by the EC president, and since the credits were authorized under a collective name and everyone had to pay even if they did not use them.²³

This information coincides with denounces from large proprietors; in 1948 Salvador Azanza (administrator of Hacienda Trancas and proprietor of one of its fractions) pointed out: “in Río Laja there are only 13 ejido owners who use every product from the ejido [...] imitating the old bosses, they have a group of sharecroppers at their service [...] Margarito Villegas sows by means of intermediaries most of the lands pocketing considerable revenues. What is more, he and his son, Fernando, are fleeing from the justice as they assassinated Alberto Gutiérrez, police inspector, who try to remove the preeminence from Margarito Villegas [...]”.²⁴

On April 15th 1948 the partial execution of the ejido was formally performed; the possession of 1 358 ha took place, as 115 were returned to Elodia and Concepción Gavidia, and 80 were recovered by Isabel Galván as a part of her untouchable property.²⁵ The 2 000 ha which affected Trancas Hacienda were at disposition of the Agrarian Department because of agreements between the authorities, Salvador Azanza (affected proprietor), Margarito Villegas (EC) and 12 more ejido owners. They signed a document wherein they refused said fractions of the ejido because of their fairness

²³ Various ejido owners Lino Ordaz (born in 1915), Eulalio Ordaz Bocanegra (born in 1917), Rafael Villegas (born in 1925), 1998.

²⁴ April 20th 1948; for the Constitutional Substitute Governor of the State, from Benigno Mejía, Secretary of Comisión Agraria Mixta, transcribes the letter by Salvador Azanza. San José de Badillo, exp. 222.

²⁵ August 29th 1952; For José Villaseñor, delegate, from Zeferino Arvizu, president of EC, exp. 1184.

(15 km) and because they did not find them necessary.²⁶ According to the stories, the devolution of land to the Gavidia sisters and Isabel Galván was negotiated, with money in the middle, by Margarito; and as for the lands of Trancas it was because of lack of people interested in the plots, and to decrease the conflicts with Salvador Azanza, who was considered the most feared landlord in the municipality.²⁷

Given the delinquency problems the men of Villegas family were involved in (the homicides of Alberto Guitiérrez and of the brother of the Priest of Dolores), the first perpetrated by Margarito Villegas Sr., and the second by Margarito Villegas Jr.), between 1950 and 1952, the ejido owners stopped belonging to the defense battalion and the government took their weapons. New authorities were also appointed; the post of president of the ejido Commissary was given to Zeferino Arvizu, who faced the problem of usufruct of water for irrigation which they shared with a neighbor; because of this issue the ejido owners Cruz Arredondo and Tranquilino Alamilla were taken to prison.²⁸ These radical attitudes were a reflection of the antipathy the authorities (and the regional society) hold against the ejido sector.

A pressing demand from peasants and neighbors was the censal depuration; the reports issued in 1953 by Manuel Aguilar (commissioner of the agrarian delegation) pointed out the expiry of the basic census, since out of the 210 registrations, only eleven had taken possession of the lands; in the remaining 203 it was distinguishable the presence of 85 residents out of the region, 58 had died leaving no heirs or they were simply not known, and 30 were pawns or sharecroppers in the ejido (or in the vicinity) who did not know their ejido owner status (see listing):²⁹

²⁶ April 15th 1948; Acta de ejecución parcial. Río Laja, exp. 23-21640 ARAN-M.

²⁷ Rodrigo Rosas, ejido owner, Soledad Nueva, 2003.

²⁸ August 17th 1953; For the Delegado from Zeferino Arvizu, president of EC, exp. 1184.

²⁹ Own elaboration based on: Manuel Aguilar Milán, "Informe de investigación practicada del 25/08 al 2/09 de 1953", exp. 1184.

Unknown:	18
Died with no appointed heirs:	40
Absentees: Mexico City, 18; U.S., 10; other States, 7; not known, 10.	45
Work in Ferrocarriles Nacionales and live elsewhere:	40
Small proprietors:	7
Have trades in Dolores Hidalgo (stevedore, barman, sexton, butler, etcetera):	14
Merchants, with capital over 10 thousand pesos and under Hundred thousand pesos:	2
Have a plot in other ejidos:	2
fugitives:	2
Pawns or sharecroppers in the place:	30
Do not want to be sharecroppers for the authorities:	5
Disabled:	3

Besides the seven individuals registered in the basic census, in Río Laja there were 39 peasants with a plot; Manuel Aguilar noted down the control of resources on behalf of the Villegas. “Agustín Villegas has 15 sharecroppers, a brick factory, hires 80 ha to Eustacio Ariaza and controls all the peasants of the region; Margarito Villegas Jr. has 12 sharecroppers and Delfino Villegas has 12 intermediaries [...]”. He repeated that Margarito Villegas was wanted in two prosecutions from the homicide of Alberto Gutiérrez and his son also by the name Margarito, was incarcerated by the homicide of a brother of the priest of Dolores.³⁰

After the results of this enquiry, the idea of making a censal cleansing to correct the anomalies became pressing. The ejido owners protested, for according to them, it meant an attempt to include railroad workers, established merchants, the bell-ringer, the sexton and the synarchists, many of them registered in the basic census. They stated that this movement was backed by the landlords (Manuel Azanza, León Peña and Eloy Marina) and by the League of Agrarian Communities of Guanajuato.³¹

The investigations carried out by the personnel of the Agrarian Department retook petitions of peasants from diverse fractions of the ejido, where they asked to be recognized as ejido owners and to be separated from Río Laja. In 1950, for instance, peasants from Jiricuiche asked their

³⁰ Idem.

³¹ March 6th 1954; Acta de asamblea, exp. 1184.

formal incorporation to the ejido; they argued having been sharecroppers in those land for more than 20 years and having worked with the affected owner, who had a leasing in that fraction. Previously they had asked for the recognition of their rights and to help formalize their situation, Margarito Villegas (Treasurer of EC) had asked them to pay 20 pesos each, which they gave Delfino Villegas (president of EC).³²

In 1952, the peasants of La Vidriera, El Lindero and Los Arcos insisted on their recognition as ejido owners and on their separation from Río Laja. They underscored being far from the center of the ejido and proposed to join the three fractions, regularize them and obtain their Certificates of Agrarian Rights; thus, they planned to become subjects of financial credits, which they have always lacked.³³

The asked for the separation from Río Laja with profound resentment against the Villegas and with certain neutrality for Eustacio Araiza. Ramón Rosas (peasant from El Lindero) said that he considered himself ejido owner, even though he recognized he was supplied (with yokes and seeds) by E. Araiza (the affected owner).³⁴ Ponciano Armendáriz, peasant from Los Arcos, insisted on the separation as a way to be free from the injustice of the “Villegas landlords”, who, according to him, “have turned into servants the real ejido owners suing their influences and weapons [...] There are 20 individuals registered in the basic census (BS) who work as sharecroppers and do not have their rights guaranteed; there are eight registered in BC who do not enjoy lands because of the mistreatment they have been subjected to”.³⁵ Another peasant, Gabino Gómez, denounced the selling of plots by the ejido authority; he pointed out that in 1950 he acquired a plot, via the payment of 50 pesos and animal manure worth 35 pesos; this was delivered to Margarito Villegas.³⁶

³² February 2nd 1950; for the delegate from Isidro Padrón, Santiago Mireles and other neighbors in Jiricuiche, exp. 1184.

³³ May 4th 1954; Acta de investigación del ejido de Río Laja, nucleuses La Vidriera and El Lindero. Carlos García Domínguez, chief of the 3rd ejido zone and assistants, exp. 1184.

³⁴ *Idem*.

³⁵ May 7th 1954. Acta de investigación, Los Arcos. Carlos García D., chief of the 3rd ejido zone. Exp. 1184.

³⁶ May 9th 1954. Acta de investigación, Los Arcos. Carlos García D., chief of the 3rd ejido zone, exp. 1184.

In the problems of Río Laja, both the League of Agrarian Communities (and with it, CNC) and PRI (Magdaleno Aguilar, secretary of Agrarian Action) were involved; the representatives explicitly expressed their support for the movement of peasant who asked their regularization as ejido owners;³⁷ the Villegas and the ejido authorities, on their own, were backed by the General Union of Workers and Peasants of Mexico (*Unión General de Obreros y Campesinos de México*, UGOCM). Jacinto López and Lázaro Rubio (from UGOCM National Executive Committee) stated that “in the background of that movement you find the hacienda owners [...]; these peasants have been militants of synarchism, they were with the Cristeros and are enemies of the agrarian reform. They denounced that synarchists were in league with the agrarian delegate who ordered to provide land to a group of 121 peasants who were taken into account in the censal depuration [...] the armed forces of the State propitiated the conditions to fulfill this order”.³⁸ Given the situation, they asked for the removal of the State forces and not to provide land to the synarchists until the case was solved in the Direction of Agrarian Rights.³⁹

The protests of UGOCM had an effect, the railroad workers and the wealthy merchants were not incorporated into the ejido, but the so called synarchist peasants were, who were sharecroppers from El Lindero, La Vidriera and Los Arcos and Jiricuiche.⁴⁰ This group, around 60 peasants, was supported by the directly affected proprietors, who continued enabling production, and landlords Manuel Azanza (in Trancas) and León Peña (in La Noria, San Diego de la Unión) and the agrarian authorities.

The problem became political, because the ejido authorities had abused the confidence from the government; it was a conflict between leaders with different political affiliation, who with argumentations of making justice for

³⁷ July 16th 1954. For the Director of Derechos Agrarios, from Magdaleno Aguilar, secretary of Acción Agraria of PRI, exp. 1184.

³⁸ For the Secretary General of DA, from Jacinto López and Lázaro Rubio from CEN of UGOCM, exp. 1184.

³⁹ *Idem*.

⁴⁰ January 14th 1955; For the delegate, from Castillo Villaseñor, chief of DA. He transcribes complaints of the representatives Jesús Cisneros Roldán and Pedro Ayala; April 08th 1957. For Rafael Carranza, Secretary General of DA, from Jacinto López of UGOCM, exp. 1184.

the peasants exhibited their strength; indeed the Villegas and other small proprietors only cared for their interests. All had bypassed the agrarian reform: the Villegas had become foremen of the peasants; the Azanza had many a petitioners killed, avoided the formation of the ejidos which remained in their properties and sold ejido lands. León Peña was charged with many deaths of agrarians and, in those years, he had a “white” ejido, and the others which affected his lands, simply, were not executed. All of this and more was tolerated by the agrarian authorities. By then, some landlords had rehabilitated and were backed by the governor José Aguilar Maya, who was openly anti-agrarian.

In that time (1955), Río Laja was the delegation head, it had 2 057 inhabitants and it was the most important settlement of the ejido.⁴¹ It was no longer led by the agrarian leaders, was not armed and was not part of the defense battalion. Four of its fractions were freed from the “yoke” of EC and in a certain way they worked as they did before the agrarian reform. The social sectors seem to retake the old harmony, which was reaffirmed by the construction of a temple devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Beside the temple, the central square was also constructed, with gardens, trees and benches; all of this invited to gather and conciliate the parts in conflict. The religious factor which once divided them now joined them.

In 1958, EC was composed of Eulalio Ordaz (compadre of Margarito and then confronted with him and his followers), Zeferino Arvizu and Blas García; this group made alliances with the newly recognized ejido owners (former sharecroppers) and it was so that they reached the majority. The pioneers of the ejido integrated the secondary power of the Committee of Vigilance: Delfino Villegas, Ángel Vázquez and Alejandro Grifaldo.⁴²

The “dynasty” of the Villegas not only had weakened, but had come to an end with the assassination of Margarito Villegas (in 1955), committed while two of his sons (Fernando and Margarito) were prisoners in Dolores Hidalgo.⁴³ The sons of Margarito, after obtaining their liberty, started their revenge by struggling to recover the two thousand ha which affected Trancas

⁴¹ 1957 Census, listing of populations that integrate Río Laja Delegation. Exp. 1184.

⁴² 1958. Acta de elección de autoridades ejidales. Exp. 1184.

⁴³ Fernando Villegas, Río Laja, 1995 and 1998.

Hacienda. In this task they joined Jesús Orta (who grew in the hacienda and then was a distinguished member of UGOCM) and other agrarian leaders of the region; it was in the 1970's when they started to see some results of this task.

In 1962 there were elections to renew the ejido authorities. Fernando Villegas (Margarito's son) was part of a panel which was discarded by the ejido owners because of "the outrages and injustice of the past". Seventy-nine ejido owners attended the assembly; they vested the EC in Andrés Méndez, Rafael Vázquez and Zeferino Arvizu. The Committee of Vigilance was composed of Eulalio Ordaz, Aurelio Villegas and Eusebio Méndez. The group of the Ordáz family retook the ejido authority as from 1968⁴⁴ and with certain alternation they have administrated and controlled the ejido.

The changes in the power structure were neither sufficient to solve the anomalies in the ejido, nor to eliminate the practice of sowing ejido lands though sharecropping, hiring or bulk work. By 1960 no ejido owner had a Certificate of Agrarian Rights (CAR). The census, carried out on January 17th 1955, had not been approved by the Agrarian Advisory Body because of the questionings from organizations, which claimed to represent the interests of the peasants in conflict (CNC, UGOCM). The census performed on June 2nd 1960 recognized 121 ejido owners; out of them 71 worked directly on the plots, 50 were sharecroppers and only received half of the harvest.⁴⁵ the regularization of plots and the deliverance of CAR was not solved until 1973; still back then there were talks of work by sharecropping and 10 vacant lots were reported to be dealt on the basis of preferences for the sons of ejido owners⁴⁶ and not to the sharecroppers who worked the land.

⁴⁴ February 21st 1962; Acta de cambio de autoridades ejidales; July 2nd 1968, Acta de cambio de autoridades ejidales. Exp. 1184.

⁴⁵ July 25th 1960; report to perform the censal correction by Enrique Villafuerte sent to the General Director of Promoción, Procuración y Quejas. Exp. 1184.

⁴⁶ November 8th 1973; Report of plot usufruct. Exp. 1184.

Reflections

In Río Laja, as in most of the ejidos of the municipality, the agrarian repartition under President Cárdenas was rejected by the workers of the plots, since accepting it implied a drastic severance with the agents and traditional structures (bosses and clergies), in order to be part of a bureaucratic and military structure which combated and made them combat their own social stratum.

The pioneers of the ejido were not countryside workers, not even native from the municipality, they were people with different trades which risked their life for the lands, they garnered scorn and marginalization from the locals, however they did not understand the true meaning of agrarianism: they took the ejido and as the new “masters” of its resources they felt the right to exploit it as it was best for them.

It is important to point out that in Río Laja the ejido representation, the control of bank credits and the chieftain of rural defense were concentrated on EC, which was in the hands of the Villegas family. In actual terms, up to the fifties there was neither Committee of Vigilance nor the General Assembly of Ejido owners, which could have been counterweights to decrease said concentration of power and functions.

Separately, the way the productive tasks were organized (up to the late 1970's) was not radically different from the one maintained by private proprietors: the exploitation of land from hiring and sharecropping. In addition, however, this is not made explicit by the text, the president of EC made changes in the plots, sold grasses, firewood and other rangeland resources; he charged the non-ejido owners “a fee to work” and “a fee for the grass”. This is to say, president of EC made the same that any other boss in the region back then; because of this Salvador Azanza pointed out “the Villegas imitate the old bosses” and Ponciano Armendáriz (peasant from Los Arcos) in his protests referred to them as the “Villegas landlords”.

This functioning of Río Laja, to a good extent, came from the initial rejection of the peasants for the governmental project, and also from the lack of execution of the regulation that controlled the relations inside and outside the ejido: planes and divisions, control of peasants who worked the land; Certificates of Agrarian Rights, etc. With these lacks, the authorities

of the ejido had ample maneuver margins and it comes as no surprise that they adopted the practices and uses of the caciques both to produce and exercise power.

In this case, we have seen how an agrarian became an ejido cacique, and from the abuse of weapons came into conflict with other sectors of the local society. Indeed, the fact that Margarito Villegas was like “the bosses of old” was not the fundamental reason for the crisis of the ejido, or of its demise; several ejidos in the municipality worked that way. In Margarito there was a violent and criminal behavior, which stressed hatred, revenges and they became a political issue; he possibly forgot that a good cacique (or mob leader) not only punishes or threatens; they are also part of their clan and are obliged to provide support and protection.

Notwithstanding, Margarito made enemies with everyone; with the agrarians of the municipality for the killing of Alberto Gutiérrez (an important leader back then); with the proprietors affected by the agrarian repartition; with the sharecroppers and agricultural workers which deemed unfair to pay to produce in ejido lands. For them the exploiter was not the enabler, but EC which charged for the use of land as if he were the owner; neither had Margarito support from his friends and compadres he incorporated into the ejido. He was isolated: only his children supported him, whom he shared power and wealth with during the last years.

The death of Margarito Villegas and the expulsion of his family from EC decreased the conflicts with the affected proprietors and the sharecroppers, who had become part of the ejido; it did not solve the problems of resource control and power abuse nevertheless: a large part of the lands continued being worked by sharecroppers and the new president of EC still had a cacique role, as several of his peers in other ejidos of the municipality.

The experience of Margarito Villegas invites us to reflect on the limits of cacique-like political domination: a cacique who does not respect hierarchies, disregard alliances and make extensive use of violence will not go far; it is not redundant to point out that a cacique is a way of political domination whose representatives are the product of an anomalous union between traditional society and modern politics, and an organizing concept which “is part of the large universe of political clientelism which unite actors with uneven political weight who come from lasting authority hierarchies (Knight, 2001: 329).

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