

The reform of article 27 and the future of agriculture

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Some 22 years ago, in *Old Revolution, New problems*, (Joaquín Mortiz, Mexico, 1970) I warned that "if agricultural reform continues in the same way as it has up to now, it will soon provide every Mexican, in perpetuity, with a plot of land two meters long, one meter wide and two meters deep, just as in any graveyard worthy of the name."

I made this statement at the time because the current Department of Agriculture had already distributed three times the available arable land in Mexico. Agricultural reform, which had begun in 1915, was already over 50 years old and the longest surviving program of its kind in the history of humanity, (see *Guinness Book of Records*).

In a rare flash of technical insight and political suicide, President Echeverría's Secretary of Agriculture, Oscar Brauer, declared, "the PRI organizes the *campesinos* to vote not to produce".

By 1970, agricultural production had begun to decrease as agricultural imports increased. The population rose from just over 50 million to its present 86 million, while the number of Mexicans living below the poverty line swelled to almost 30 million.

Nonetheless, it took recognition of the problem, analytical ability and the spirit of modernization to admit that the distribution of land was finally over, reform article 27 of the Constitution and abolish the Department of Agricultural Reform, as has already occurred.

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According to the old law, the *ejido* could not be sold, embargoed, transferred, prescribed, or divided, but this was not true in reality. Mexico's great urban growth of the last 60 years was almost always achieved at the expense of *ejido* land.

Everyone in Mexico knew that *ejido* land was bought, sold and rented, and that it was the object of theft, trespass and fraud and frequently expropriated for "the public good" to be subsequently turned into golf courses and subdivisions on payment of minimal compensation.

Fears that great landed estates will reappear are groundless. The *latifundio* requires a medieval environment with servants and lordly privileges which have long since disappeared. It cannot survive in a society with railways, roads, schools, television, freedom of passage, free real estate markets, stock markets and the attractions of the northern border, which although fraught with risk, holds the promise of employment, dollars and fair-skinned women on its other side.

The reform will provide both domestic and foreign capital to get agriculture moving again. *Ejido*, communal land, and small holdings will be combined in enterprises known as "in-bond agro-industries" which, using the latest technology and machinery, will produce and industrialize food, fibers and flowers both for export and domestic consumption.

Profits will be shared equally among land-owners and investors, while the wages paid field laborers and industrial workers will be high. It will be feasible to create modern infrastructure to provide support and research for the whole sector.

At long last, wooded areas will be reforested with quick-growing varieties to produce cellulose and wood for domestic consumption. Finally, there will be a tremendous upsurge in agricultural, forestry and livestock research that will qualify a whole new generation of agricultural technicians. **M**

Sorting coffee beans near the Chiapas border with Guatemala.

