Campesino and Revolution: Contests from Below in Yucatán, 1915-1923

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13 April, 2022

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AGE, Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán
    PE, Fondo “Poder Ejecutivo 1915-1924”
    CE, Fondo “Congreso del Estado”

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to Professor Deborah Valenze, my thesis advisor, for her patience, insight, and enthusiasm throughout this process. My project was deeply affected by her reminders to center the campesino in my writing and I very much look forward to continuing our conversation about the organic formation of political consciousness in history.

A very loving thank-you to Dani Goodman Rabner, my writing partner, tea sock friend, and scholar of the Jewish Labor Bund. I would also like to thank Dani's family in Mexico, who joined me as investigative researchers in the eleventh hour to help me identify a particularly illegible signature.

I extend my deep appreciation to everyone I met in Mérida. I was really moved by the warmth and generosity of spirit I encountered; when things went somewhat awry during my trip I had a handful of numbers to call. I would especially like to express my gratitude for the support of Vanessa Fernández Vergara, an archivist at the Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán, who challenged me to ask for help with my research.

Thank you to the Barnard College Lucyle Hook Travel Grant and to the support of the Barnard History Department who made my research possible; this thesis would not exist without it.

I would also like to thank Dan La Botz who advised me in the early stages of my project and was excited to talk about Mexican labor and radical history with me at length. Of other conversations that were formative to my project, I thank John Womack, Professor José Moya, and Professor Pablo Piccato. For being excellent teachers during my time at Barnard, I would like to thank Professor Nara Milanich, Professor Joel Kaye, Professor Premilla Nadasen, Professor Barbara J. Fields, and Professor Mohamed Amer Meziane.

Thank you to my friends and comrades who have grounded me and grown with me over the last couple of years. The list is too long…but to name a few, I love you, Clara, Wally, the Lilys, Maya, Kalley, Anna, Sachi, Leila, Siri, Luis. Finally, thank you to my incredible grandmas, Grandma Deb and Grandma Mary, and to Mom, Dad, Maeve, and Liam. I love you!

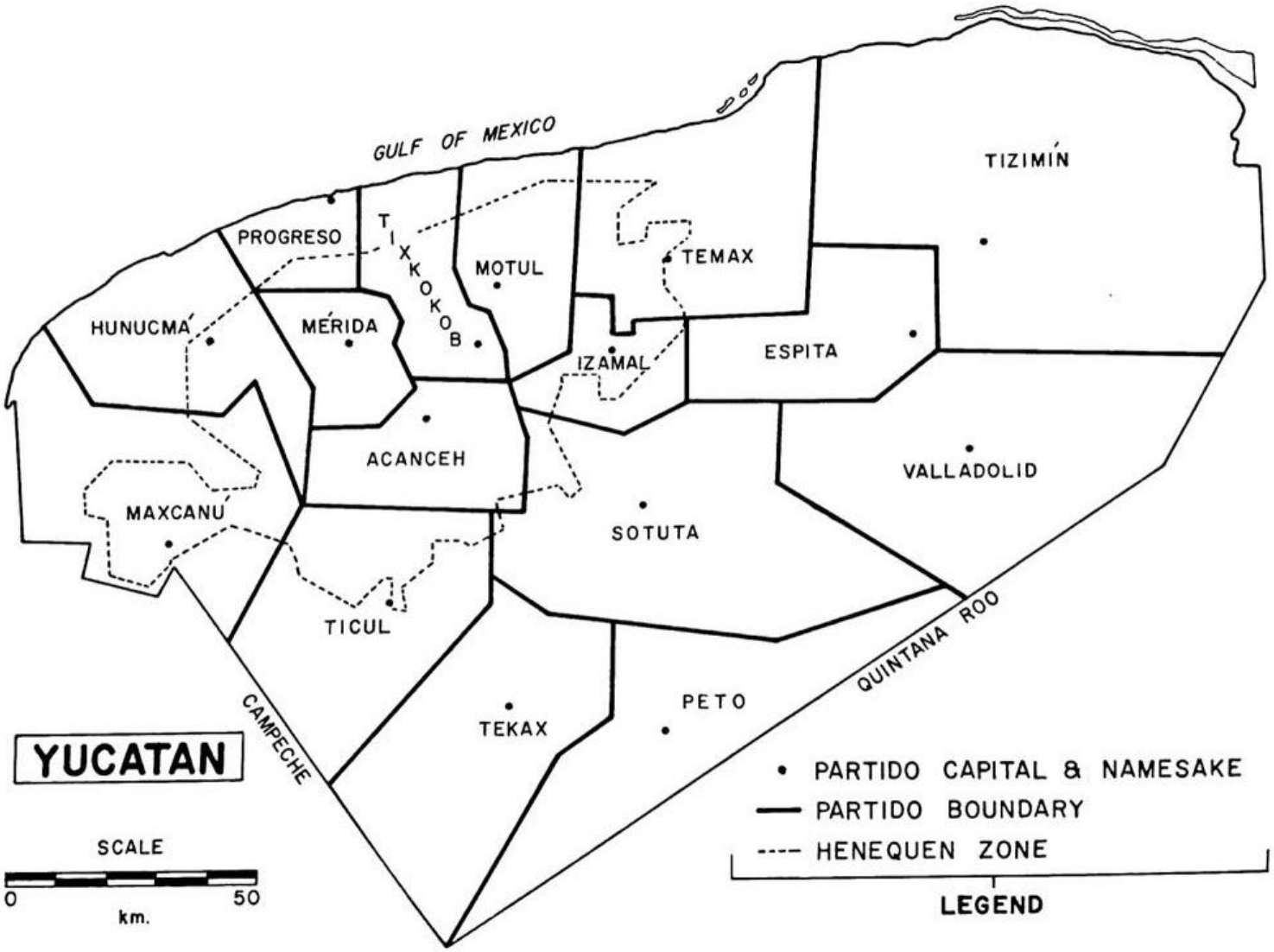

Figure 1. Yucatecan municipality divisions and modern henequen zone. (Roland E. P. Chardon, Geographic Aspects of Plantation Agriculture in Yucatán, Washington D.D., 1961, p.11)

Introduction

The Revolution hit Yucatán like a wave.

In his 1917 dramatic comedy *La ola*, playwright Antonio Mediz Bolio describes the violent character of this wave that would separate the new world from the old. In his metaphor, the old world of slavery, structured by generations of an oligarchcal regime, was like a tower that would collapse due to the onslaught of the sea: "There it was, proud and lone, full of shadows and centuries."[1] Jaime, the young protagonist of Mediz Bolio's story, warns his family, who are entrenched in the corrupted elite of the old society, that if they do not change their ways justice will come like a wave to tear the tower of the old from its foundations. This wave symbolized a nation in a process of modernization, and it would save only those who believed in change.

JAIME:
Listen… Maricela… listen… do you hear? It is the sea
that is raging tonight… listen… listen!
Perhaps there, far away, the wave already sings, the wave that is to come…![2]

The wave would come to Yucatán in 1915 with the arrival of General Salvador Alvarado, deployed to his governorship from Mexico City. In a late and particular manifestation of the Mexican Revolution in a region that was geographically and politically isolated from its central events, Alvarado overhauled the Yucatán's old forms of social relations. He enforced the end of debt peonage, beginning the peninsula's new era of wage labor, and reinvented labor laws along with a justice system that would, in theory, favor the worker. However, he was always bound by compromise. The fountain of wealth that financed Alvarado's social reforms was simultaneously

[1] Antonio Mediz Bolio, "La Ola" (Mérida, Yucatán: Imprenta Ateneo Peninsular, 1918), 109, as quoted in Luz María Góngora Alfaro, "El significado social de la poesía de Antonio Mediz Bolio," *Revista de la universidad autónoma de Yucatán*, 234 (2005): 93.
[2] Mediz Bolio, "La Ola," 43.

the root of his greatest contradiction. This contradiction was henequen, a spiny agave plant used to make rope. Unique and native to the region, henequen shackled Yucatán in a tight-knit and ultimately inescapable network of dependency with Mexico City and the United States.

The indigenous Maya people of the Yucatán peninsula had grown henequen since before the conquest of the Spanish in 1540. In an old Maya myth, a henequen plant pricked the leg of the priest who led the first Maya discovery of the region, causing him to bleed. In that moment, as the myth goes, the priest knew that they had reached Yucatán, and that this plant would shape the course of his people's history.[3]

The agave plant did not come to structure the everyday life of the Maya until the 1880s when the United States noticed its value.[4] Through an intensive labor process, the pulp and the fiber of the henequen leaf could be separated, dried, and processed to create a commodity for which North American capitalists realized there was a great demand in their agricultural sector: binder-twine. The invention of the McCormick reaper, a 1878 machine that expedited the grain-harvesting process, exploded its profitability.[5] In the years that followed, a U.S. company, International Harvester Corporation (IHC), monopolized the henequen industry; it evaded anti-monopoly legislation in the U.S. to form a relationship of indirect corporate imperialism with Yucatán. IHC did not own the henequen haciendas that appeared, but forged close and

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[3] Yucatan Today, "Leyendas Mayas: Zamna y el Henequén" August 26, 2010, https://yucatantoday.com/leyendas-mayas-zamna-y-el-henequen/.

[4] G. M. Joseph, *Revolution from without : Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 30.

[5] McCormick's reaper revolutionized agricultural production in the United States and also had an intimate stake in U.S. politics of the late 19th century, which draws an interesting parallel to its political and economic influence in Yucatán. See Daniel Peter Ott, "Producing a Past: Cyrus Mccormick's Reaper from Heritage to History" (P.h.D diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2014). The company drew on mythologies about its role in the Civil War and re-imagined its influence in public memory: as the company put it *post facto*: "'The reaper is to the North what slavery is to the South'" (Ott, "Producing a Past," 18). Ten years after its invention, a police attack on workers who were picketing outside of a McCormick reaper plant sparked the events of the 1886 Haymarket Riot in Chicago.

contractual business bonds with the owners of these haciendas. As a result, IHC and the planter oligarchy in Yucatán, creole elites who were the descendants of Spanish settlers, formed a mutually beneficial relationship that both parties protected closely. Within the protection of this monopoly relationship, approximately twenty families, who constituted the "Casta Divina," controlled nearly all of the henequen cultivated on the peninsula.[6] The henequen industry, like the sugar industry that had risen and fallen before it, was developed on land that Maya had formerly used to grow subsistence agriculture, primarily maize alongside cattle and various cereales.

Thus, the local elite, led by the Casta Divina, gradually privatized communal indigenous lands through their spread of commercial agriculture onto land that was considered by the state to be empty. Through this forcible displacement as well as methods of coercion, the sugar and henequen haciendas found their labor base: the Maya *campesino*. The children and grandchildren of Maya peoples who traditionally cultivated several plants of henequen for their own family needs alongside their *milpa* (cornfields) were enslaved by the hacienda system in the nineteenth century to form the labor power of processed henequen as a raw commodity on the world stage. The tower of this immutable society seemed unshakeable, moored in time by a brutal labor regime backed by international relations of power. Yet, in 1915 and again with a new radicalism in 1921, revolutionary forces transformed the social relations of production.

How exactly would this new world emerge from the old? The dominant and generally accepted thesis in the historiography is that the Revolution in Yucatán was a revolution from above, or a *Revolution from Without*, as is titled G.M Joseph's classic work on the period. In this interpretation, the revolution, which lacked a strong and effective popular base, was imported to the region by Carranza ("from above") and implemented through political measures. The lack of

[6] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 37.

sufficient popular organization and structural repression of the campesino masses was why the revolution ultimately failed in 1924, and why the region needed Alvarado to free the debt peons in 1915. I concur with these basic conclusions. Yet, this old regime of power was not as stable or inert as was popularly thought.

In his 1923 account of the Revolution, the anarchist Cuban journalist Carlos Loveira described the political actors of the revolutionary wave who overturned the old and stratified structure of society on Mexico's southeastern peninsula. He described the last group in his list as nearly an afterthought:

> they were the working men, of the countryside and of the towns, who later figured predominantly in the revolutionary effervescence, and some persisted afterwards, due to their faith and unwavering tenacity, and others have become lukewarm or schismatic, because of their egotism, unfounded disappointments, or the impatience of political radicalism, which are never lacking after the immediate ideals of the struggle have been achieved.[7]

These political actors— the Maya campesinos who worked in and near the henequen haciendas that produced the region's wealth—and their "egotism, unfounded disappointments, [and their] impatience of political radicalism" are the central foci of this thesis.

I seek to complicate the narrative of "revolution from above," not to refute its main contributions regarding the ultimate inadequacy of popular mobilization in these years, but rather to question assumptions about the unfolding of the Revolution *within* this period. The Maya masses were not a docile monolith, and instead, as I hope to suggest in the following pages, were in a constantly evolving and dialectical relationship with the political motions of the Revolution in Mérida. The informed consciousness of the Maya was a result of decades of experiences of injustice at the hands of the hacienda system; their informed consciousness, in turn, informed the course of the Revolution. Through worker protests and land invasions, the Maya campesinos had

[7] Francisco J. Paoli and Enrique Montalvo, *El Socialismo Olvidado de Yucatán : Elementos Para Una Reinterpretación de La Revolución Mexicana* (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1977), 21.

more political organization and authorship in the unfolding and radicalization of the Revolution than the literature has thus far accounted for.

Theoretically, I ground my study in the irrepressible and fundamental conflict between two agricultural systems: the Maya milpa subsistence system of production and the henequen commercial export system of production. The land disputes and struggles that were generated in this conflict necessarily root an approach to the Revolution in the experience of the Maya campesino, for it was their history since colonization that found expression through resistance to this conflict. Part of my argument, thus, is historiographic: in the literature, I observe a disjunction between the way that the so-called Caste War period of the sugar boom is studied versus the way that the henequen period is studied. I argue that the centralization of the historic question of land use should be continued across these two periods. In the history itself, it is well acknowledged that this conflict guided political struggle (*¡Tierra y Libertad!*-- Land and Liberty!) was the slogan of Felipe Carrillo Puerto's Socialist Party of the Southeast. However, in the historical literature, the incompatibility of these two agricultural systems does not guide analysis as much as does an economic analysis of the henequen industry and its political consequences. Through theoretical repositioning, I aim to reveal that, inevitably, a study of this period should be a study of the Maya campesino— rather than the most visible political layer of the Revolution, that of disputes between revolutionary government officials and wealthy *hacendado* elites. Therefore, with this historiographic proposition I hope to suggest a fecund area of new study.

The literature I will build most directly upon is that of Paul Eiss, whose ethnohistorical study of campesino meanings of collectivity and politics of labor during the Alvarado years laid the groundwork for the possibility of a properly grassroots and in-depth study of the post-1915

period, as well as studies of the pre-revolutionary years by Allen Wells and G.M. Joseph regarding indigenous insurgency and its relationship to U.S. economic powers.[8] Beyond the relationship between campesinos and the Revolutionary government, I will also weave in aspects of the relationship between the bottom and top rungs of a ladder of dependency in Yucatán, 1915-1923: between the specter of U.S. capital through the company International Harvester, whose economic presence was always felt before it was seen, and the Maya campesinos who were dispossessed and displaced by the henequen commercial export system of agriculture. The conflict between milpa and henequen production, ultimately, was a conflict between Maya workers and *pueblos* and the U.S. agricultural giant IHC, often mediated by the political stratum in Yucatán.

In Chapter 1, "Milpa and Henequen, a Historical-Ecological Framework," we will analyze the conflict between the land systems of milpa (maize-centered cultivation) and henequen, or more generally, between communal subsistence land use and capitalist export land use. Histories of the revolutionary period in Yucatán tend to fasten onto a study of henequen, as the industrial product of the period, rather than of land. I will justify my theoretical approach of orienting my study on this question of land, and insist upon its centrality to the history of the campesino. The emphasis on the industrial leads us to an analysis of class struggle; the emphasis on the spatial and the territorial leads us to an analysis of decolonial struggle. Both of these analyses are critical, but in the particular case of Yucatán, the class struggle may best be understood within the context of the decolonial. Thus, I will contextualize the history of the

[8] Allen Wells and G. M. Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatan, 1876-1915* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996) ; G. M. Joseph, "The United States, Feuding Elites, and Rural Revolt in Yucatan, 1836-1915." In *Rural Revolt in Mexico: U.S. Intervention and the Domain of Subaltern Politics* (Duke University Press, 1998) ; Paul K. Eiss, "A Measure of Liberty: The Politics of Labor in Revolutionary Yucatan, 1915-1918," in *Peripheral Visions: Politics, Society, and the Challenges of Modernity in Yucatan* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010) ; Paul K. Eiss, *In the Name of El Pueblo: Place, Community, and the Politics of History in Yucatán* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Maya campesino in the Revolutionary period in a brief history of modern peasant rebellion on the peninsula, and then look at details of henequen and maize cultivation and labor processes to expound on their systemic contradiction as capitalist and communal systems respectively.

In Chapter 2, "Authorship from the Fields: Worker Formation on Hacienda Oxcúm," we will study the political mobilization of workers on Hacienda Oxcúm. This worker protest, diminished as apolitical and chaotic by hacendados and the historical literature alike, in fact was highly organized. In the course of the protest, the workers became authors of the Revolution as it affected their local labor conditions. They challenged Alvarado's compromised labor reforms through "misinterpretations" of the law and gained political consciousness through the process of their organizing. In these sites of exchange, I argue that the workers on Oxcúm were active political subjects that engaged in dialectical exchange with officials of the Revolution.

In Chapter 3, "Land Invasion: from the People to the Party," we investigate the land invasions carried out by *vecinos* (neighbors, or villagers) who lived in pueblos near henequen haciendas. These vecinos would trespass onto hacienda lands to plant their milpa. We will uncover the political and historical significance of such land invasions, which have only rarely been studied carefully by historians of the period. Further, I will inquire about the formation of the Socialist Party of the Southeast's local *ligas de resistencia* (were they formed from above or through the grassroots?) as well as the connection between land invasions and the employment by the Socialist Party of the Law of Idle Lands in 1922 (was this relationship causal or incidental?). I will argue that the Law of Idle Lands was effectively an attempted reversal of the 1825 *Ley de colonización*, a law that will be explored in Chapter 1 enabling the privatization of communal lands, and that the land invasions of vecinos may have been an important precursor to the political initiative of the cultivation of the idle lands.

The autonomy of the Maya campesino during the Revolutionary years in Yucatán, 1915-1923, is demonstrated in the strength of their political organization, within and outside of hacienda borders. As political collectives, these campesinos contested the reformist inclinations of the early years of the Revolution, drawing on an abundant and long tradition of indigenous struggle on the peninsula. The relationship between campesino and Revolution was volatile and reactive: in these sites of exchange, the ideals of the Revolution collided with grassroots political consciousness of the Maya. Through this dynamic process, the demands of the Revolution came to life.

Chapter 1. Milpa and Henequen, a Historical-Ecological Framework

> "I begin with the hypothesis that so intense a struggle of moral values implies a struggle of world views and that so intense a struggle of world views implies a struggle of worlds…"
>
> -Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*

The origin of "the pueblo's discontent," as argued by a group of indigenous campesinos in Hunucmá in 1917, was the historic "despoliation of communal lands" of the Maya.[9] Throughout the Revolutionary period, collectives of campesinos evoked organic and local histories of a century of dispossession to argue for the reclamation of their communal lands. These workers and peasants understood their struggle for land and the ability to feed themselves during the 1915-1924 period as the continuation of indigenous struggles in Yucatán, waged by their parents and grandparents before them. The appropriation of the Maya's communal lands by the hacienda system stretches back to the early 1820s. The forms of resistance and the struggle of the Maya for the return of their lands certainly changed over time—as they were subjected to the demands and particularities of the sugar industry, military mobilization in the 1847 Caste War, and the rise of the henequen industry. However, across these time periods, the question of land remained central. The slogan of the Socialist Party of the Southeast (PSSE), *¡Tierra y Libertad!* (Land and Liberty!), rearticulated this priority when it was adopted in 1918 and guided the PSSE and the campesino masses alike through an agrarian-centered radicalization of the Revolution through 1923 (where my study ends).

Strangely, the question of land appears somewhat marginal in the historiography. The conflict between commercial and communal agriculture, which remained of utmost importance

[9] *Revista de Yucatán*, 24 October 1918 ; Juan Bautista Pech B. to gobernador, 3 March 1919, Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria, Hunucmá, as quoted in Eiss, *In the Name of El Pueblo*, 139.

to the campesino, is not foregrounded in the historical writing on the Revolutionary period. Instead, a political history more concerned with the biographical lives of the revolutionary leaders, and the relations of dependency that structured political clashes, takes its place.

To recenter the campesino in this history, we must first recenter the question that preoccupied them: the question of land.

In this chapter, I will investigate the conflict between commercial and communal land use, typified in the Revolutionary period in the struggles between the henequen hacienda commercial export system versus the milpa (maize cultivation) subsistence agriculture system. To do so, I will trace land use conflicts back to the early 19th century with the beginning of the hacienda system after Mexican independence from Spain. These agricultural conflicts erupted into violence in the so-called Caste War in 1847. Then, I will propose a utilization of the frameworks proposed by Howard Cline (1948) and Arnold Strickon (1954) to analyze the social history of the Revolution through the lens of the conflict between agricultural systems: namely, between henequen and milpa. The conflict between the incompatible systems of henequen and milpa, between commercial and communal agriculture, was central to the lives of campesinos during the Revolution, as expressed through the demands for maize by henequen workers and the land invasions carried out by peasants. As such, I claim its centrality to my own study.

A historiographic approach to the so-called Caste War

In 1845, cereal crops (maize, beans, and rice) grown by Maya campesinos in the crop-growing system known as milpa, made up 54% of the estimated value produced in Yucatán.[10] Yet, the self-sufficiency of the Maya was under threat: for decades already, creole

[10] Howard F. Cline, "El Episodio Azucarero En Yucatán (1825-1850)," *Yucatán: Historia y Economía*, 5 (1978): 20, Tabla 1.

businessmen had seized their communal lands through legal means and used these lands to nurture the birth of the hacienda system. Two years later, the bloodiest peasant rebellion in Latin America, the so-called Caste War of 1847, erupted in Yucatán. The historiographic challenge to the name "Caste War"—which has been widely discredited in the last century of the literature on Yucatán—advanced a new thesis on the cause of the rebellion, which I will argue has instructive potential as a framework for ethnohistorical study of worker protest in Yucatán's henequen region during the Revolutionary years.

The first central thesis to coin the Caste War was a racist one, originated by creole historians near the turn of the 20th century. These historians characterized the Maya rebellion as that of barbarians who were motivated by accumulated resentment and hatred of the white elites. Thus, these histories spun the racist fear of the creoles following the devastation of the rebellion onto the Maya themselves. In this antiquated interpretation, the rebellion was a race war whose aim was to exterminate the creole population of the peninsula.[11]

Howard F. Cline (1948) advanced a different argument in a new historiographical direction which was later furthered by Antonio Canto López (1976) and Leopoldo Peniche Vallado (1977).[12] This new trend located the causes of the rebellion as social, rather than racist, and rooted in centuries of feudal land dispossession. Cline, and later Lawrence Remmers (1981), provides a more historically precise argument. Cline argues that the economic shifts in the postcolonial age, as the colonial economy of Yucatán became obsolete and the production of new commodities took its place, inspired profound social changes. This period of transformation from 1825-1850, in the words of Cline, was neither ancient nor modern, and the economic change

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[11] G. M. Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery: Essays on the History of Modern Yucatán*, (University, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 27. See Karen E. Fields and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London ; New York: Verso, 2012) for explanation as to why I describe this historiography as racist rather than racial.

[12] Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery*, 26.

altered the fabric of colonial social relations between the state and its Maya population.[13] Before independence from Spain, the colonial cattle and maize hacienda increasingly drew Maya campesinos onto estates as resident laborers. They were often lured there by the need for water and grain, which the hacendados monopolized. Yet, the Maya communal agricultural system remained relatively undisturbed under Spanish domination. Because of the dry Yucatecan climate in which little grew, the Spanish were unable to impose wheat as the principal subsistence crop nor were they able to demand that the Maya grow other crops as a form of tribute. The Maya were also not subjected to the *mita*, or the forced mine draft, as indigenous people were in central Mexico or Peru, because no such mines existed in Yucatán.[14] With economic transformations after independence, however, the Maya agricultural system faced an existential threat.

Commercial sugar cultivation began in 1823. In 1825, a statute called the *Ley de colonización* allowed planters to easily annex public lands. These public lands, or *tierras baldías*, were often in practice forested lands on which Maya communities grew milpa. In 1841, limits were placed upon the permitted sizes of communal Maya lands alongside a heavy tax on *campesino* agriculture in 1844.[15] As the agricultural economy was revolutionized and given legal legitimacy, the creole elites attacked and destroyed Maya milpa, necessarily displacing small Maya ranchers and maize cultivators. For the first time, "sugar competed directly with the Indians for the best lands."[16] Along with the destruction of Maya subsistence agriculture that conflicted with the territorial interests of sugar expansion, the landed elite, supported by the state, exerted more pressure on Maya communities through taxes and increased attempts to

[13] Cline, "El Episodio Azucarero En Yucatán (1825-1850)," 5.
[14] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 20.
[15] Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery*, 31-32.
[16] Cline, "El Episodio Azucarero En Yucatán (1825-1850)," 13.

extract labor.[17] As Cline writes, "the Maya were left with the option to submit to the discipline of the commercial hacienda, or to flee or fight. The Caste War was their answer."[18]

The conflict between Maya subsistence agriculture and commercial plantation agriculture was further theorized by Arnold Strickon (1954). In a work evaluating the synchronic "folk-urban continuum" theory of anthropologist Robert Redfield concerning cultural development in Yucatán in the 1930s, Strickon proposed an alternate historical-ecological framework.[19] Strickon theorized that hacienda society was inextricably linked to the culture that Redfield's ethnographic study had observed. He proposed that Maya culture and agriculture had been necessarily conditioned by hacienda society through "cultural ecological adaptations" over time.[20] For Strickon, the ecological conditions of Yucatán—delineated into three ecological zones (the Northern henequen zone, the Central-Eastern surplus maize zone, and the Southern subsistence maize zone)—determined each subregion's required role in relation to the larger world economic system (see Figure 2). The persistence, then, of Maya culture, which Strickon considers primarily to be manifested through their traditional agricultural milpa system, depended on its permissibility or utility in its specific geographical location to the system at large. For example, he writes that Maya culture was able to survive in a more unadapted subsistence form in the Southern region than in the Central region because of its geographic distance from the henequen zone; the Central region *pueblos* still maintained their milpa system, but were also responsible for growing surplus maize to sell to the Northern region, where the land use was conserved solely for henequen cultivation. Strickon's study was critical because it

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[17] Ibid., 5.
[18] Ibid., 13. This is my translation from the Spanish, which may differ slightly from the English original.
[19] "Whereas Refield regarded the historical process in Yucatán in linear fashion, as the gradual spread outward of essentially benign and powerful modern forces emanating from the urban northwest, the new ethnographic studies present a picture which is far more turbulent and complex…" (Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery*, 19.)
[20] Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery*, 16.

extended Cline's study of the relationship between the commercial agriculture of sugar and Maya communal land tenure to the henequen period; it both applied historical ecological conflict to the henequen industry and theorized this conflict.

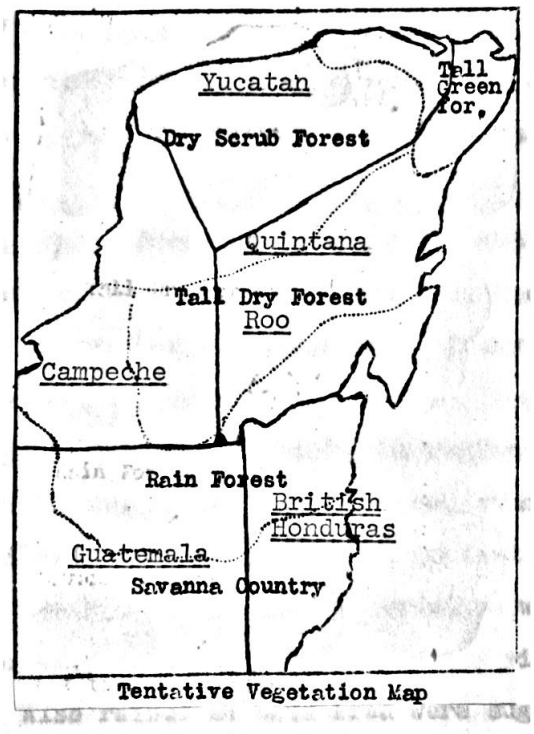

Figure 2. Strickon's three ecological zones: the Northern henequen zone "Dry scrub forest," the Central-Eastern surplus maize zone "Tall dry forest," and the Southern subsistence maize zone "Rain forest." (Source: Arnold Strickon, "Hacienda and Plantation in Yucatan: An Historical Consideration of the Folk-Urban Continuum in Yucatan," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1954), 111.)

The legacy of the Caste War, sometimes today more accurately called the Peasant Rebellion of 1847, underlies Yucatecan memory and identity. Though it is stunningly little-remembered in public institutions such as museums and tourist sites, the memory of the war is kept alive in Maya communities through oral traditions and monuments.[21] Still, the historic and violent mobilization of campesino rebels—who in 1848 controlled 80% of the territory of the peninsula—is hard to recognize in the Yucatán of today, commended by the tourist industry as the "safest" region in Mexico.

[21] See Kasey Diserens Morgan and Richard M. Leventhal, "Maya of the Past, Present, and Future: Heritage, Anthropological Archaeology, and the Study of the Caste War of Yucatan," *Heritage* 3, no. 2 (June 23, 2020): 511–27.

This dissonance holds a historic logic: 300,000, or half, of the population of Yucatán was killed in the Caste War.[22] This demographic transformation undoubtedly gutted the militant strength and organization of Maya communities in the region. Yet, the war did not decimate Maya resistance to the extent to which it is portrayed in some of the literature. After the war, the sugar plantations as well as many maize and cattle haciendas were destroyed—which gave rise to the henequen industry's rise in the north of the peninsula. These new plantations needed workers: *hacendados* lobbied for the peons who were discharged from the army to be returned to their haciendas, and these peons were joined in the labor force by significant numbers of refugees from the Quintana Roo frontier. These refugees migrated to the plantations for security and food, both of which were scarce in the southeast warzone.

Therefore, a sizable proportion of the laborers who would come to comprise the dependent henequen labor force were Maya veterans of the 1847 rebellion, which, for a brief historic moment, severely threatened the life of elite settler-colonist hegemony on the peninsula. It is not so difficult to imagine that this tradition of self-determination and rebellion as cultural legacy would live on in new manifestations on the henequen haciendas. To unearth the causes of conflict on the henequen hacienda, we must expound upon the contradiction between the henequen and milpa systems of agricultural production.

The henequen system: a totalizing labor process

"Yucatan—lots of people think it's a kind of chewing gum. It is," quipped the National Association for the Protection of American Rights in Mexico. "Also it is—or was—the most prosperous State of Old Mexico. Therein lies the story of Bread, Bolshevism, Binder Twine."[23]

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[22] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 22.

[23] National Association for the Protection of American Rights in Mexico, *Bread--Bolshevism--Binder Twine* (New York, 1920), 4.

Published around 1918 in New York City, "Bread--Bolshevism--Binder Twine" gives an embittered and mythologizing account of Alvarado's regulation of henequen in the years after he officially brought the Mexican Revolution to Yucatán. It also betrays the importance of henequen, and the maintenance of its low price, to both the United States government and cordage manufacturers. The National Association continues:

> In Yucatan the "henequen," growing on the hot edge of a limestone rock, with little or no visible means of nourishment and no water, throws out thick, sword-like leaves filled with the toughest, finest fiber known for binder twine, rope and cordage. The Mexican native pounds the leaves with the back of his machete until the pulp and fiber are separated—then he weaves the fiber into hammocks—the American farmer uses it to bind his wheat crop into sheaves. These two distinct uses typify the difference in character between the two peoples.[24]

However, in fact, the production of the binder twine that supplied the U.S. agricultural industry for decades arose from a much more arduous and complicated labor process. The National Association's narrative can be used to understand the importance of henequen for North American interests and the economic demand that compelled the extraction of henequen from Yucatán. Nonetheless, the portrayal of the Mexican worker by North American interests ("[The Mexican] weaves the fiber into hammocks") grossly misrepresents the intensive and specialized labor system which sustained the henequen economy in Yucatán and the cordage industry in the United States.

The henequen hacienda labor system was all-consuming in its maximalist ambition, typical of extractivist plantation economies in Latin America. The work of the henequen laborer began in the early hours of the day, at three or four in the morning in order to avoid the midday heat. From the ring of the bell that would call the henequen worker to report to their work-gang chief in the morning to the end of their working hours in the early afternoon, the tasks of the henequen worker revolved around the plant's sharp thorn: "Thorns like saws, thorns like hooks,

[24] Ibid., 8.

thorns like spears, thorns like needles," writes Fernando Benítez, "among them lives the Maya *campesino*... the reality of henequen is the thorn."[25]

The labor in the henequen fields was grueling. It would begin with the cutting and harvesting (*el corte*) of the henequen: the worker would cut off the sharp tip of each leaf off and then used a curved bladed tool called a coa to cut off the leaf from its base. The leaves would be bound in groups of fifty and then carried to the end of the field, where it would be transported to the processing factory via carriage or tramway. Another critical task in the henequen labor system was weeding (*el chapeo*). Weeding had to be done constantly to keep the paths in the henequen fields between the plants clear, and to provide space for the harvester to cut the henequen leaves most easily. Workers were often expected to weed and cut simultaneously—a demand which was often denounced as exploitative by the workers. Likely the most difficult and brutal task of henequen labor was the clearing of old henequen plants from the field (*la tumba*) after the plant had surpassed its productive period.[26] Beyond field labor, labor on the hacienda included industrial labor, which was done in the processing factory located near the plantation house, as well as transport work, and miscellaneous upkeep tasks such as firewood cutting, gardening, carpentry, etc.[27]

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[25] Fernando Benítez, *Ki: El Drama de Un Pueblo y de Una Planta* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1956), ebook sans page numbers.
[26] Allen Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen, and International Harvester, 1860-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 166-167.
[27] Despite the transition to (low) waged labor in 1915, the labor demanded by the henequen industry in the 20th c. was analogous to sugar plantation societies across the Caribbean and Latin America in the 19th c. in its intensity and structure.

Image 1. A Maya peon henequen worker during the Porfiriato. (Source: Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery*, 78).

The character of worker demands on the haciendas were shaped by their task-system of wage labor, in which workers were paid per number of leaves cut, *mecates* cleared, or other task performed. Typically, a worker would cut and bind 1,000 leaves of henequen a day. In our period of study (1915-1923) this was usually compensated at around one peso, though compensation varied significantly between haciendas and tasks. Some of these tasks were salaried (i.e., waged per day) while others, such as *el corte* and *el chapeo*, were piece-work (task-system). In order to demonstrate the discrepancies of how different tasks were compensated, we turn to an example: in 1897 on the finca San José Kuché, industrial and transport workers were paid 200% of the wage of the field workers (.50 pesos/day compared to .25 pesos/day), while, by contrast, the administrator of the finca was paid 536% of the wage of the field workers (40 pesos/month or

approximately 1.34 pesos/day, along with loads of corn included in his wage).[28] The challenges that the workers posed to the hacienda system responded to the specificities of the labor system: they protested to raise task rates, improve working conditions, choose the tasks which they would perform, reduce the minimum number of leaves ordered to be left uncut, and lower the price of goods in the hacienda store (*tienda de raya*).[29]

The totalizing nature of the henequen industry meant that it threatened, and was threatened by, any system that it could not subsume. The system's hunger for land and for intensive labor was absolute. Under ideal conditions, the henequen plant would live for twenty years and be productive for eighteen of these years. During that period, in order to maximize profitability the plant needed to be maintained constantly. In the years of the Porfiriato leading up to the entrance of the Mexican Revolution into Yucatán, the appropriation of *ejidos*, or Maya communal lands, was continuously facilitated by the state government, drawing more and more numbers of *comuneros* as well as *mecates* of land into the hacienda system. Yet, the struggle for communal practice continued in conflict with the henequen commercial export system. Beyond the struggle for milpa, or traditional maize cultivation, as a cultural and religious rite, the indigenous Maya fought for the survival of the milpa system of production out of material necessity. As the economic activity of the peninsula was consumed by henequen production in the first decade of the 20th century, Yucatán lost its ability to feed itself and instead gradually resorted to importing maize to the *tienda de raya*, which the workers would then have to buy from their employer. Thus, the conflict between land use, between labor systems of production, and between the commercial and the communal was a struggle for life itself and a people's

[28] Ibid., 168.
[29] Eiss, "A Measure of Liberty" in *Peripheral Visions*, 56.

access to basic self-determination. What was the milpa system of production, and how did it survive the existential threat posed by the commercial extractivism of the hacienda system?

The milpa system: Maya agriculture of subsistence

Milpa, or the Maya subsistence agricultural system of maize production, was the second main production process in Yucatán. The milpa system was a distinct system of production from henequen in both its technical labor process and its relations of production. Most critically, milpa was the sustenance practice of Maya communities, granting the campesinos of the peninsula self-sufficiency and the ability to grow enough food to feed themselves. This changed, however, with the parasitic spread of henequen production, during which maize began to be imported to the peninsula in high quantities. Because the henequen industry absorbed the land and labor force that had been previously dedicated to maize cultivation, milpa production decreased.

Milpa was a rigorous method of slash-and-burn agriculture. Maize, interspersed with other crops such as beans, tomatoes, chiles, and sweet potatoes, could be sown and cultivated for two years on a plot of land. After two years, the exhausted soil would be left to replenish for between 12 and 15 years.[30]

The process began with the time-intensive clearing of the land: the *milpero* burned the land beginning in March to prepare for the planting of the maize in the end of May or beginning of June with the rainy season.[31] The crops then were grown throughout the summer, which involved meticulous weeding. The milpa was then harvested in August.[32]

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[30] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 17.
[31] Marie-France Labrecque, "From Peasantry to Proletariat: The Rural Proletariat in the Henequenera Region of Yucatan, Mexico" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1982), 341.
[32] Ibid., 345.

The cultivation of milpa was also a Maya religious rite, and still is, though it is increasingly undergoing secularization. In its religious practice, a ceremony of *Kay-col* would be performed by an H-men (Maya priest) after the sowing of the milpa. An altar would be built and chickens and nixtamal, another preparation of corn, would be offered up and collectively eaten. Afterward, "God-willing," it would rain and the milpa would grow well.[33]

The inconsistencies, and indeed contradictions, between the practices of the cultivation of henequen and traditional milpa generated conflict. Henequen grew best on land on which it was the only crop. Furthermore, the work schedules of the two crops were not complementary: henequen needed practically constant weeding and once cut its leaves needed to be processed immediately.[34] Thus, the henequen harvesting season was year-round: ironically, hacendados accumulated wealth from the industry in a state of constant financial insecurity. Their enterprises were high-risk and high-reward. The rasping machine was costly to maintain, their labor supply became increasingly scarce, and they were at the mercy of fluctuations in the henequen market, which proved to be temperamental during these years. Meanwhile, milpa cultivation was also intensive but required work for only half a year. When the labor force and tracts of land that had previously been dedicated to milpa were converted into parts of the henequen industrial process, the milpa system faced an existential threat. Yet, milpa was not destroyed by capitalism—it only adapted its form and methods.[35] In this period of henequen economic dominance, milpa did not exist as it had prior to the spread of commercial export agriculture. Rather, Maya people

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[33] Ibid., 343.

[34] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 25-26.

[35] Milpa can be better understood, in the Revolutionary period, as a "countersystem" to henequen rather than a system of tradition. I draw this concept from Djerbal, Daho, "History Writing as Cultural and Political Critique, or the Difficulty of Writing the History of a (de)Colonized Society" *Romanic Review* 104, no. 3/4 (2013), in which Djerbal posits that because the idea of tradition is born through processes of colonization, historians would be better equipped to investigate colonized and post-colonial societies through investigating the nature of systems that challenge or live outside of hegemony rather than naively subscribing to the idea of the traditional.

struggled for the survival of milpa in autonomous pueblos that existed in the space between henequen haciendas as well as in the underused lands of the haciendas themselves.

Milpa/henequen as a framework of analysis

By drawing on a long historiography which uses spatial analysis and agricultural conflict to understand nineteenth century Yucatán, I use Strickon's historical-ecological framework as a theoretical starting-point from which to investigate twentieth century conflict on and around henequen haciendas. Strickon's research inspired a new generation of ethnohistorical work on the interactions between Maya and hacienda (which Strickon called European) culture. However, surprisingly, there is still a comparative deficit of ethnohistorical research in the northwestern "henequen zone" region, despite the fact that "the plantation's big house provided the immediate contact point of Indian and Spanish culture, while in the frontier region the contact was less direct."[36] In his writings, Strickon acknowledged this deficit and hypothesized that, likely, Maya culture in the henequen zone had disappeared, as the commercial cultivation of the plant did not align with the harvest cycle of maize and had no use for the subsistence agricultural system. "What persisted," he wrote, "were the peripheral elements—the core was gone."[37] Yet, this remains as a question posed at the end of his paper: did Maya milpa and religious rites persist in the northwestern context, and to what extent? In the employment of Strickon's historical-ecological framework, the following chapters will examine hyperlocal historical episodes on and near henequen haciendas to complicate Strickon's findings. Albeit in conditions of repression and harsh labor requirements, we will see that the struggle for milpa cultivation often structured the resistance of both *vecinos* and workers against henequen hegemony.

[36] Strickon, "Hacienda and Plantation in Yucatan," 109.
[37] Ibid., 110.

In light of the unique spatial class and cultural conflict that characterizes the modern history of Yucatán, we necessarily look beyond the most visible political layer of the Revolution, imported to Yucatán in 1915, to the workers whose labor was the real basis of the henequen industry. Accordingly, in this thesis I am interested in the dialectical relationship between the workers and the Revolution as administered from Mérida. I ask how the conflict between milpa and commercial agriculture particularly manifested during the Revolutionary years, and in turn, how the Revolution was shaped and mediated by this struggle of worlds.

Image 2. 'King Henequen' depiction. Henequen, embodied, reigns over an ancient Maya temple. (Source: Cover of *El henequén* 2 [May 31, 1917] as found in Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950*, 1st ed. (Environmental History Series, no. 21. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 44.)

Chapter 2. Authorship from the Fields: Worker Formation on Hacienda Oxcúm

Revolutionary sentiment hung ominously in the air on the finca Nohxen in February of 1917. Seemingly inexplicably, the workers had assumed a "hostile attitude" and refused to go to work in the henequen fields.[38] In a frustrated letter to Governor Salvador Alvarado, Guillermo Mangas, military commander of the municipality of Hunucmá, explains that the workers had claimed that Alvarado himself gave them permission to give speeches on the finca and skip work on Monday to instead hold a festival. "But today," Mangas writes on Tuesday, "they did not work either, and now they purport [*pretender*] to be paid one peso and fifty cents per thousand [henequen leaves] cut. And although the owner raised their wages to one peso [per thousand henequen leaves cut], they do not want to work." When the owner tried to convince them to go back to work, two of the workers threatened to tie him up and carry him to Mérida, where Alvarado's revolutionary administration was based.[39]

This threat, whether or not it was said in seriousness, is indicative of the legitimacy that the hacienda workers ascribed to Alvarado's administration and their belief that the revolutionary government would rule in their favor on matters of labor. Alvarado, contrary to the workers' belief, was often more invested in the concord between forces of labor and capital than he was in the localized and particular labor struggles of henequen workers. The actions taken by the workers of Nohxen would likely not have been sanctioned by either Alvarado's 1915 *Ley agraria* (Agrarian Law) nor by his *Ley de trabajo* (Labor Law). However, through a reframing of these legal misinterpretations as radical *re*-interpretations of the law, we begin to understand henequen

[38] Guillermo Mangas to Salvador Alvarado, 11 January 1917, Volume 234 file 31, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[39] Ibid.

workers as active and strategic labor organizers, and their protests as sites of exchange between the revolution from above and the campesino.

The dominant history of Alvarado's arrival to Yucatán tells the story of the General, the state's embodiment of the Mexican Revolution, and his liberation of the debt peon through sweeping reform and structural upheaval. However, upon closer examination, Alvarado's liberation of the workers of the countryside was not so straightforward nor so top-down. Though Alvarado's legislation had profound social effects, he remained bound by allegiance and obligation to the powerful actors of the henequen hacienda system. The workers were not constrained by this same ambivalence. They proved uncompromising in their fights for improved labor conditions and freedom from the lingering vestiges of slavery. It is true that the workers, most of whom were illiterate, likely had a less-than-accurate conception of the true purpose of the laws of the Alvarado administration. However, as collective interpreters, the workers took a political formation. They, more so than officials higher up in the revolutionary government, disrupted the hegemony of henequen production. In doing so, the workers stepped outside of the confines of the law towards the economic rights that they *imagined into* the revolutionary laws, whether or not those rights were there.

In this chapter, I will investigate the nature of worker formation on henequen haciendas through the case of Hacienda Oxcúm. On Oxcúm, as on haciendas across the region, henequen workers were active political subjects who shaped the course of how the Revolution touched their lives. The archival materials concerning the events in the fall and winter of 1916 on Oxcúm are comprised primarily of dense and evocative correspondence between government officials. These letters provide a window into the organization of the worker protest on Oxcúm and beyond.

Building from the argument of historian Cindy Forster in her study of workers in the Guatemalan context of the 1944 October Revolution, I also note the dynamic relationship between worker and Revolution. The worker protests on henequen haciendas challenged, rather than submitted to, the reformism and ambivalence that were concealed underneath Alvarado's revolutionary rhetoric, and as a result laid the radical groundwork for Felipe Carrillo Puerto's socialist project which would gain authority when he became governor in 1921.[40] As Forster writes, "The single most striking quality of revolution as practiced by the poor was their definition of justice in the realm of economic, rather than political, liberties." [41] The conflicts between hacienda workers and hacendados arose in the liminal space between the henequen field and the milpa plot, over the ability of the workers to grow or buy maize to live. In other words, through struggle for material necessities rather than anti-imperialist ideals, the hacienda workers disrupted the hegemony of the commercial export system more directly than their educated revolutionary compatriots.

[40] Cindy Forster, "Reforging National Revolution: Campesino Labor Struggles in Guatemala, 1944–1954," in Aviva Chomsky, Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, ed., *Identity and Struggle at the Margins of the Nation-State: The Laboring Peoples of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean* (Duke University Press, 1998).
[41] Ibid., 207.

Image 3. *Labor Omnia Vincit*, "Work Conquers All." A photograph of hacienda workers assembling for a religious ceremony. (Source: Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery*, 77)

The Case of Hacienda Oxcúm

In 1916, the overseer of Hacienda Oxcúm, Gilberto Flores, sent a letter to Salvador Alvarado, governor and military commander of the State. The facts that Flores relays in his short letter are written "with all clarity and simplicity to give a perfect account" of the abuses committed against him.

One Saturday, he writes in his account, Flores presented the *jornaleros*, or day laborers, of the hacienda with their wages alongside maize for the jornaleros to buy. By Alvarado's own law, the value of the maize on haciendas, priced in this case at 55 cents per almud, was set to match its price in its adjacent pueblo.[42] That particular Saturday, as Flores began to try to sell the

[42] 1 almud=approximately 7.568 liters and is a unit of dry measurement implemented by the colonial powers of France and Spain in the Americas.

maize, he faced resistance: the jornaleros demanded that the price of the maize be reduced to 25 cents per almud. Flores, backed by what he knew to be the decree of the law, refused. What happened next is nearly as surprising to a reader of the letter as it must have been to Flores. "With this motive, Juan Tún, who serves as an authority on the hacienda Oxcúm, ordered the politicians Pedro Canul and Mateo Mená to take me prisoner in the *calabozo* [prison cell]" writes Flores. "There they locked me up from three in the afternoon on Saturday until three in the morning on Sunday, for twelve hours, and what's more, they burned an herb that nearly asphyxiated me and made me bleed from my nostrils."[43]

The militant act of locking their superior in a prison cell overnight and engaging in low-level torture on November 18 was the beginning of a month of highly organized political action by the workers of Hacienda Oxcúm. Through a close analysis of their political protest, it becomes clear that the disruption of the workers did not arise from ignorant insolence, or chaotic tendencies, as hacienda and government officials would accuse, but rather from deliberate political agenda. As such, the strategic choices of the workers provide insight into their motivations and methods as a collective.

The decision of the workers of Oxcúm to lock Flores in the hacienda's prison cell (*calabozo*) as their form of retribution can be better understood through contextualization of the function of the prison cell in Yucatán's plantation society. In her article "Historias de vida de campesinos henequeneros" historian Esther L. Iglesias relates two oral histories conducted with Maya campesinos who tell stories of living through the Mexican Revolutionary period. Don Manuel, one of the informants who recounts growing up on an hacienda in Motul, recalls the putative role of the prison cell:

—How many times did you go to the *calabozo*?

[43] Gilberto Flores to Salvador Alvarado, 20 November 1916, Volume 214 file 48, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.

—Not many times. Those who did not finish their [daily] work went. Some of the older people who could not work hard, there were 4 or 5 [of them] a day.

—And how many times did you enter, or were locked inside, the *calabozo*?

—I was locked in the *calabozo* as well, but because I was young and I worked hard, only around six times.

—Did they give you food in the *calabozo*, or no?

—Those that had families brought them food. No, neither the master nor the overseer took care of us; we ate by our own account.

—And since you didn't have family, what did you do?

—Well, I didn't eat until I left. If one is imprisoned in the morning, he would come out the next day and eat then. There they treated us like animals. They didn't consider us Christians. It was the age of slavery…[44]

In Don Manuel's account the *calabozo* is shown to play a critical role in facilitating the transition from a system of debt peonage to wage labor, a transition which was increasingly enforced beginning in 1915. Since hacendados were newly required to pay their workers a wage and could not legally keep their workers on the hacienda through force, they needed to find coercive methods to retain productive labor. One such method, according to Don Manuel, was to incentivize hard work through the threat of imprisonment. Bonds of paternalism had been severed—the hacendados would not bring the workers food while they were imprisoned, for example—but the *calabozo* remained. This form of justice was internal to the hacienda and not regulated by Alvarado's government, and as such was a vestige of the old social system. In these terms, Don Manuel was correct to assert that "it was the age of slavery." From this point of view, the imprisonment of overseer Gilberto Flores takes on a new meaning: for instance, why did they not destroy the henequen plants, burn a building on the hacienda, or something to that effect as a form of protest? I suggest that the locking of Flores inside of the *calabozo* was a specific rejection of the practices of slavery that Flores likely practiced on these same workers in the past. Beyond being an expression of resentment, this action directly challenged the integration with practices of free labor with those of slavery.

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[44] Esther L. Iglesias, "Historias de Vida de Campesinos Henequeneros," *Yucatán: Historia y Economía*, 5 (1978).

Following the imprisonment of Flores, the workers did not go back to the fields. Five days into their strike, on November 26, the municipal president of Umán Pedro A. Canul visited the hacienda to investigate the dispute.[45] The managers of the hacienda had lodged two formal accusations against the workers: Gilberto Flores denounced Juan Tún for the imprisonment and near-asphyxiation incident, and the administrator of the hacienda, Felipe Leal, denounced several of the other workers for obstructing labor on the hacienda. At five in the afternoon Canul first approached Juan Tún, who, by his description, was a 35 year old *jornalero*, married, born in and resident of hacienda Oxcúm. He asked Juan Tún directly: "is it true that the overseer of the hacienda, Señor Gilberto Flores, was imprisoned by your order?" "Yes, it is true," replied Tún.[46] Then why, asked Canul, did you order it? Tún's answer was simple: Flores had paid several workers only 10, rather than the promised 12, reales per day. Flores, the overseer, informed the workers that he did plan on paying them the extra money, but on the behalf of the workers who had come to him with the complaint, Tún ordered Flores to be imprisoned anyway.[47]

Yet, this did not explain the ongoing work stoppage. So, what were the demands of the workers? Canul asked this question to Antonio Tún, another worker on the hacienda. Antonio explained that since the 18th, maize had been priced at 55 cents per almud. Since before, when it was sold at 25 cents per almud, the jornaleros had been paid 12 reales for *el corte*, or the cutting of the henequen, they should now be paid one peso for *el corte*, Antonio Tún reasoned.[48] "This is the reason that we do not want to work for cheap," he testified: though the price of maize had doubled, the wages of *el corte* had stayed the same. Antonio attested that if the petition of the

[45] Pedro A. Canul to Salvador Alvarado, 11 December 1916, Volume 220 file 42, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

jornaleros was met, they would gladly return to work. When Canul asked him who it was on the hacienda that expressed their discontent with their wages, Antonio answered: all.

The collectivity and political organization of the workers, as shown in the unity invoked by Antonio's response to Canul's question, sustained their strike. The jornaleros did not work for the hacendados during their weeks on strike, but rather for themselves: "they have dedicated themselves to cutting down the *montes* to make charcoal and firewood, which they sell at a very high price." As we will investigate more fully in Chapter 3, the extraction of charcoal and firewood from the haciendas by campesinos threatened the hacendados because a) it meant that the campesinos were not reliant on their wages earned through henequen cultivation and b) the wood supply of the hacienda, which would otherwise be used as fuel for the rasping machine, was diminished. As such, the cutting down of the *montes* by the striking workers likely heightened the anxieties of the hacendados and strengthened the position of the workers, on both a material and tactical level. Furthermore, Juan Tún—"with instincts that truly impose"—together with a small group of other workers worked tirelessly to elucidate their fellow jornaleros, "preaching to them that they should not work just because they had been told to."[49] The character of the worker's strike, from their unanimous strike to their coordinated sale of hacienda resources to the labor organizing led by Juan Tún, demonstrates clear and sophisticated political organization. This organization, as such, implies political worker consciousness. Consciousness processes, particularly in the case of illiterate workers and peasants, most often cannot be read in an archive. We thus look for consciousness in the moments where it breaks the surface of history, such as here, in the tracks of carriages carrying firewood and charcoal from Oxcúm to the nearby pueblo to be sold, in the empty henequen field,

[49] Cenobio C. Inclán to Salvador Alvarado, 18 December 1916, Volume 221 file 13, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.

populated only with uncared for and dying plants, in the motionless gears of the rasping machines, and in accounts of gatherings of workers whose "instincts…truly impose."[50]

In light of his investigation, Canul ignored Alvarado's disapproval of the workers' actions and ruled in favor of the jornaleros: he acquitted Juan Tún of the charges brought against him, through he warned that Tún must stay away from mistakes such as locking hacienda overseers in prison cells so as to not discredit the Constitutionalists and their revolutionary platform. In response to Administrator Leal's complaint, he stated that the obstruction of labor on the hacienda did not exist, and that Leal himself was responsible for the interruption of labor. In accordance with this, Canul dismissed Leal from his position at Oxcúm, to the satisfaction of the *jornaleros*.[51] Still, Canul did not lower the cost of maize nor raise wages for *el corte*, perhaps because he lacked the authority to do so. Because their demands had not been met, the workers' strike continued.

The figure of Juan Tún is a compelling one, and leads us to formulate some critical questions, and tentative answers, regarding the character of worker formation on henequen haciendas during the years after legal freedom from debt peonage. Juan Tún was the *comisario municipal*, or the municipal delegate, of hacienda Oxcúm, and was elected to this position by his fellow workers. The authority of Juan Tún as municipal delegate was hotly contested by its overseers and owners. Gustavo Molina Font, on the behalf of Avelino Montes, wrote a letter to Alvarado denouncing Juan Tún and advocating for his removal from the position. Molina Font argued that because Juan Tún was illiterate, and because of his abuses of authority on the hacienda, the election for municipal delegate should be held again in favor of those who could read and write, of which, he wrote, there are some on the hacienda. "As long as he remains,"

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[50] I am grateful to conversations with Professor Deborah Valenze for these musings; the process of consciousness formation is, as we discussed, often invisible yet integral to the revolutionary moment.
[51] Pedro A. Canul to Salvador Alvarado, 11 December 1916.

writes Molina Font, "there will not be true order on the finca, and much less can the exploitation, conservation, and development of the plantations be carried out…"[52] The numerous demands for the demotion of Tún are indicative not only of the fact that Tún, an illiterate and popularly elected hacienda worker, was considered a threat by Montes, one of the most powerful planters on the peninsula, but also that Tún was considered to be a politically active subject on the hacienda beyond his role as a municipal representative. The political role of the hacienda municipal delegate is also suggested in the letter from Mangas to Alvarado about the worker protest on hacienda Nohxen (see above). The workers, who threatened to carry the owner of the hacienda to Mérida, wanted to see their labor complaint resolved in Mérida rather than in the municipal capital. Mangas blames this hostile attitude of the workers on the municipal delegate, Santiago Canché. Though the proposition is somewhat speculative and the question of political worker formation of haciendas in the Revolutionary period necessitates more research, we can posit that the figures of municipal delegates such as Juan Tún and Santiago Canché had prominent roles within the jornalero labor force as both political organizers and leaders.

Significantly, the workers' consciousness of the impact of their political formation stretched beyond the local. Rural pueblos in Yucatán, as throughout Mexico during this period, were localistic in nature; as historian John Womack noted, the campesinos created significant grassroots political organization to the extent to which they were connected to, and aware of, a wider world beyond their own.[53] According to a report written by representatives of Avelino Montes, another factor "that has disorganized the people of Oxcúm" was the influence of Señor Amado Ruíz, the Umán Municipal Secretary, who advised the jornaleros that they should not

[52] Gilberto Flores to Salvador Alvarado, 20 November 1916.
[53] The localism of indigenous pueblos was often a politically limiting factor according to Womack; they tended to defend that which was within their own purview, had difficulty uniting with other pueblos, and often had a limited and local worldview. According to Womack, through the Republic at large, campesinos were exposed for the first time to political education when they were drafted into military Revolutionary organizations. Conversation with John Womack, March 4, 2022.

work until the hacendados distribute the lands of the hacienda. Ruíz told the workers that the land was the property of the people, and that what was happening on hacienda Oxcúm was happening on all of the haciendas in Umán. "These," reads the letter, "are the reasons that the people of the campo have for resisting working on the behalf of the hacendados."[54] Ruíz thus introduced a political vision beyond the immediate—the redistribution of private lands to the people—and a common cause beyond the local. By invoking the other haciendas in Umán, Ruíz suggested that the workers should strike not just for themselves but all the workers who shared their affliction. This sentiment anticipated the 1917 creation of the local ligas de resistencia, which would connect the struggles of haciendas and pueblos across the state through common organization and political vision.

The dialectical motion of the Revolution was exhibited in the radical action of the Oxcúm workers, emboldened and equipped by Alvarado's reforms, and the dismay of Alvarado when he discovered that the actions of the workers went beyond the initial intentions of his very same reforms. The dance between the Revolution as viewed from the fields and the Revolution as viewed from the conference rooms of the state capital pushed structural transformation radically and quickly forward. In this course, the Revolution and its manifold inner contradictions were tested, debated, and stretched to their very limits.

When he learned of the events that had disrupted the harmony of labor and capital on hacienda Oxcúm, the fundamental limitation of Alvarado's vision of the Revolution was unveiled. In a letter to Pedro A. Canul, he writes

> The mind of this Government, to grant liberty to the worker of the countryside, was not to train him to impose his whim, nor to hinder the labor necessary to the life of the fincas, but rather to prevent their exploitation and to regulate work and remuneration, and according to this concept, the complaints alluded to indicate a false interpretation and a false idea of the vision of this government and a violent lack of the individual and

[54] Cenobio C. Inclán to Salvador Alvarado, 18 December 1916.

> property rights which is necessary to correct and avoid at all costs, so as to not fall into a greater damage than one can foresee.[55]

In this passage, the discontinuity between Alvarado's utopian autobiographical writings and his action as Governor is revealed: the true "mind of this Government" was to prevent exploitation and regulate labor while protecting property rights. Reform, according to Alvarado, should come from this "mind," and not from the workers, and should never threaten the "individual and property rights" that sustained the capitalist productivity of the henequen economy. Thus, Alvarado believed political agency belonged to the *mind* of the state, but not to the poor and indigenous *hand* of that state (*la mano de obra* translates to the manual workforce, or the hands of labor). This position might have surprised both the intellectual followers of Alvarado's espoused socialist rhetoric in Mérida and the workers who idolized his revolutionary reforms from the countryside. Yet, the true ambivalence demonstrated by the Revolutionary governor was founded in complex geopolitical relations of dependence. Given this historical logic, it was not only predictable but perhaps inevitable that Alvarado would disparage the workers of Oxcúm as overly radical, divorced from the "mind" of the Revolution, and led by a "false idea of the vision of this government."

Alvarado's Ambivalence

The arrival of Salvador Alvarado to Yucatán in 1915 overturned the social stratification that seemed to characterize the society of the South-Eastern Mexico state, a stratification embodied by a popular regional proverb: "En Yucatán deja las cosas como están" (*In Yucatán, leave things as they are*). Yet, Alvarado's self-proclaimed socialism was severely limited, as demonstrated by his disapproval of the workers at Oxcúm who freely "imposed their will."

[55] Salvador Alvarado to Cenobio C. Inclán, 20 November 1916, Volume 214 file 48, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.

Indeed, the violent theatrics of the workers on hacienda Oxcúm stood in stark contrast with General Alvarado's commitment to harmony between forces of labor and those of capital. For Alvarado, the arrival of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution that accompanied his administration to Yucatán would free the debt peon and bring widespread social and economic liberation to the dispossessed indigenous workers of the countryside. Facilitated by Alvarado, the end of debt peonage ushered in the era of the free-market to the henequen haciendas. The introduction of the free-market system made paternalism, or the direct and subjective relationship between hacendado and worker, increasingly obsolete, and shifted the management of the rights of the worker from the hacendado to the government. Hacienda labor suddenly became regulated under Alvarado's jurisdiction. In this transition to free labor, as Eiss writes, "Alvarado began an unprecedented experiment in governmental intervention into the daily operations of the haciendas."[56] This governmental intervention made Alvarado's own contradictions exceedingly explicit: no longer was it the sole responsibility of the hacendado to discipline their workers and ensure that they did not endanger the production of the region's *oro verde*. Now, Alvarado would have to square his espoused revolutionary rhetoric with the compromises demanded by President José Venustiano Carranza, International Harvester, and the ruling class of Yucatán.

Yucatán was an important asset to Carranza and he wanted it in reliable hands. As his Constitutionalist faction and the Conventionists, a unified coalition led by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, vied for control of the future of the Mexican Republic, Carranza needed to fund his war. Yucatán's economy was soaring: as the wealth of the planter class recovered from a

[56] Eiss, "A Measure of Liberty" in *Peripheral Visions*, 62.

downturn around 1910, henequen production was at an all-time high. As G.M. Joseph writes, "while the rest of the Republic made war, Yucatán made money."[57]

Within the state, the planter oligarchy stewed in the defeat of their political hierarchy and in their fear of a socialist future. These fears fermented in families like those represented in Antonio Mediz Bolio's 1917 play *La ola*, which features a family of the ruling class who has moved out of the city to safeguard their accumulated wealth from social transformations.[58] Alvarado, to a certain extent, had to appease and collaborate with this planter class for the region's fragile and monocultural economy to function, and to bolster and protect this very same economy in order to carry out his social reforms. From Mexico City, First Chief Carranza demanded that Yucatecan henequen profits meet his fiscal demands; as American writer Thomas W.F. Gann phrases it, "Mexico…justly regards Yucatán as the goose which lays the golden eggs, whose laying abilities are not to be lightly interfered with."[59] The relationship between the Yucatecan planter oligarchy and Mexico City was marred by the region's history of political turmoil, but these political tensions would easily dissolve in the face of challenges to the social and economic structures of emergent capitalism. Finally, the corporate interests of the North Americans, with the U.S. government standing close behind, kept a careful eye on Alvarado and the development of his *Reguladora*.

"I saw, without much effort," wrote Salvador Alvarado of his initial impressions of Yucatán upon his arrival in the region, "that the rich were as in need of redemption as the poor. I realized that it was only necessary that no one closed their heart to the truth for the transformation of Yucatán into a great *pueblo*, free and happy."[60] General Alvarado was a

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[57] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 6.
[58] Alfaro, "El significado social de la poesía de Antonio Mediz Bolio," 92.
[59] Thomas William Francis Gann, *In an Unknown Land* (New York: Scribner's, 1924), 233, as quoted in Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 166.
[60] Salvador Alvarado, *Mi Actuación Revolucionaria En Yucatán*, (París, México: La vda. de C. Bouret, 1920), 41.

self-proclaimed socialist, producing lengthy autobiographical writings throughout his lifetime that brimmed with revolutionary language. In these works, he assures his reader again and again that, "austere and unwavering," he followed a revolutionary path until the last day of his authority in Yucatán.[61] It is quite possible that these assurances were an act of ego: to cement his legacy and legitimize himself as a leader. On the other hand, Alvarado's prolific writing may have been a response to political pressures. President Carranza peered over his shoulder from Mexico City while the wealthy hacendados of the "Casta Divina" observed his every move from the luxury of their estates. As Carlos Loveiro wrote, "perhaps due to the polarization of hatred and idolatry, Alvarado was one of the most visible men of the Revolution, and so many neutral onlookers who have been interested in the study of that strong social upheaval have been able to judge him and his representatives."[62]

As he flaunted revolutionary ideals, Alvarado had already discovered a political solution to the contradiction between his agenda of social reform and the economic demands of Mexico City, the United States, and wealthy *hacendados*. Through proclaiming a shared ambition of moral progress for both the rich and poor—*morality from above*—Alvarado could ideologically justify a harmony between capital and labor that would protect the interests of well-functioning capitalism. The demands of the workers freed from debt peonage would be met, at least to a sufficient extent, and the economy of Yucatán would transition from a plantation, or neo-feudal, economy to a properly capitalist one. The workers would be transformed from *peones* into proletarians, and theoretically would be protected from exploitation by the government and their rights in the capitalist market. Under this pretense, "the rich were as in need of redemption as the poor." However, in actuality, this so-called harmony was only a superficial solution to the

[61] Alvarado, *Mi Actuación Revolucionaria En Yucatán*, 76.
[62] Carlos Loveira y Chirino, *El Socialismo En Yucatán; Estudio Informativo y Someramente Crítico, Base de Observación Directa de Los Hechos* .. (Habana: Impr. "El siglo XX," 1923), 33.

contradiction between capital and labor. "Harmony" did not protect the worker as much as it made visible Alvarado's ambivalence and the bourgeois limitations of his revolution.

Victory at Oxcúm

In December of 1916, the workers of Oxcúm had been "resisting work," or in other words, on strike, for four weeks.[63] In a meeting between officials who worked for Avelino Montes and the workers, the officials unsuccessfully tried to convince the workers to accept what they were paid and return to the fields. Due to neglect, the henequen field was overgrown with weeds and the plants themselves had begun to dry out: "the henequen fields were nearly in *el monte* [they were overgrown with weeds]…releasing the *varejón* [the tall stalk that signals the end of the life of the henequen plant] in a vertiginous manner."[64] In desperation, the officials decided to make a concession in the payment of wages. *El corte* was raised to 1.50 pesos and the price of maize was lowered back to .25 pesos (see Table 1).[65] The workers of Oxcúm had won the demands of their strike, prevailing against the hacendados and Alvarado alike.

Interestingly, the workers were apparently resistant to accepting this concession, although it met and even exceeded their initial demands. They only agreed to the offer after they were urged to do so by Pedro A. Canul, the municipal president. Perhaps the words of Amado Ruíz had made a lasting impact: that "they should not work until they distribute the lands of this said Hacienda."[66]

[63] Cenobio C. Inclán to Salvador Alvarado, 18 December 1916.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid. ; Eiss, "A Measure of Liberty" in *Peripheral Visions*, 67.
[66] Cenobio C. Inclán to Salvador Alvarado, 18 December 1916.

Task/ commodity	18 November 1916 price (prior to strike)	13 December 1916 price (following the strike victory)
Maize (commodity price) per almud	0.55 pesos	0.25 pesos
El corte (cutting)—first cut per thousand leaves	1.00 peso*	1.50 pesos
El corte (cutting)—following cuts per thousand leaves	?	1.25 pesos
El chapeo (weeding)—per *mecate*	*Included in the price of *el corte* (first cut)	1.00 peso

Table 1. Maize prices and task remuneration before and after the strike on Hacienda Oxcúm, November-December 1916. Source: (AGE, PE: Pedro A. Canul to Salvador Alvarado, Volume 220 file 42 ; Cenobio C. Inclán to Salvador Alvarado, Volume 221 file 13). Note: This data is derived from a deduction (based on archival references) that, in this period and place, 12 reales was equivalent to one peso.

Chapter 3. Land Invasion: from the People to the Party

> "If you want to see what it takes to be a revolutionary, come to my pueblo…"
>
> -Felipe Carrillo Puerto[67]

There was nothing sacred, for the campesinos who lived in the pueblos surrounding the henequen haciendas, about the global market's assertion of private property. Indeed, these *vecinos*, or villagers, had little regard for the legitimacy of private ownership that hacendados used to justify their so-called rights to their lands. Just as the jornaleros on Hacienda Oxcúm abided by the law selectively, using the *Ley de trabajo* when and how it served them, the vecinos who inhabited the pueblos in the henequen zone followed land rights laws only when these laws upheld their *ejidal*, or communal, land rights. Vecinos, like the jornaleros, navigated the legal in their everyday lives, and resorted to the extralegal when dissatisfied with the assumptions of the law.

The extralegal actions of the campesinos exposed and brought to the fore the revolutionary sentiments that were already present in the material conditions of the Maya campesinos' everyday lives. The Revolution was both imposed from above and embedded in the soil below. In the extralegal, examined in this study in the form of worker protest and land invasion, lay the site of exchange between the Revolution from above and those revolutionary elements from below. In this exchange, there was necessarily an interchange and transformation that occurred between the revolutionary government, in its various iterations, and the people. Most visibly, the character of the Revolution on a political level changed shape, becoming increasingly radical and tied to the interests of the people. Perhaps less visible is how the

[67] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 186.

Revolution affected the peasants and workers: how was the consciousness of indigenous Maya people shaped through the recognition and local institutionalization of their acts of protest against the henequen hacienda?

The land invasions that contested the private property rights of the elites in Yucatán were organic and manifold. In many of the land invasions, vecinos who lived in pueblos adjoining or nearby an hacienda would intrude, without consent of the hacendado, onto the hacienda lands. Typically, they would invade an "annexed" area of the hacienda or the outskirts of the hacienda, and plant their milpa. These outskirts were often known as *el monte*, or the forested area of the hacienda. Besides planting milpa, the vecinos engaged in other unsanctioned activities, from cutting down trees for firewood to making charcoal to stealing cattle for religious rites and sustenance. These resources could then be sold to supplement their low wages, or provide them with land to cultivate subsistence agriculture.

The common practice of land invasions during the Revolutionary period has not been sufficiently studied, and even less studied are the political consequences of such invasions. I contend, however, that the practice of land invasions, widespread within the henequen zone, intimately shaped the course that the Revolution would take in its later years as the Socialist Party of the Southeast (PSSE) came to power. The *ligas de resistencia*, or resistance leagues, were instruments of the PSSE; at the Workers' Congress of Motul, 1918, the Liga Central was officially created in Mérida with local ligas instated in the pueblos of the state to carry out the political activities of the Party. These ligas came to have an intimate relationship with the vecinos who invaded nearby hacienda lands; at times, the liga was indistinguishable from the vecinos themselves, most of whom were due-paying members of the Party.

The extralegal methods of the vecinos would not have, in many cases, been ultimately permissible without the local ligas de resistencia and their defense of the pueblo. In turn, the ligas would not have existed as such without the political engagement and militance of the everyday vecino. The land invasion, as such, constituted a site of exchange between the political Revolution on a local level and the economic demands of the people.

As the PSSE gained political foothold in the state, the economic revolution—which was first crystallized in local rebellions in the countryside—was legitimized by the revolutionary state apparatus. The *Ley de tierras ociosas*, or the Law of Idle Lands, legalized and supported the organic land invasions that had long troubled hacienda owners. The Law Enabling the Expropriation of Abandoned Haciendas, introduced by Carrillo in 1923, presents itself as a simple judicial extension of the Law of Idle Lands. On closer examination, the 1923 law revealed a pathway to the socialization of the henequen hacienda, which would have been a true victory of economic revolution on the peninsula.

To question the causality of these events and the dialectical relationship between the vecinos' and the Party's respective conceptions of economic revolution, we turn to a close look at the nature of land invasions, beginning in 1916, and then will attempt to follow the role of the Maya campesino within the rise of the PSSE.

Land invaders

As the henequen hacienda system of production spread throughout Yucatán, the communal agricultural system was forcibly diminished. However, it was not eliminated and the proletarianization of labor remained incomplete. Where the commons survived, both within and outside of the hacienda, Maya campesinos were able to form collectives and organize politically on the local level to repossess the pueblo.

Land invasions were one such form of repossession and were a practice with deep roots in Yucatán's history. Before the outbreak of the peasant rebellion in 1847, Maya vecinos, participating in an autonomous indigenous governmental body in the pueblo of Nohcacab, known later as Santa Elena, confronted the local hacendado over their desired extension of their pueblo's *ejido*. Armed vecinos invaded and claimed the lands of Miguel Peón in the 1880s; in 1885, a politician in Ticul was murdered for attempting to halt such invasions.[68] The rural revolts that threatened a "second Caste War" from 1909 to 1913 directly preceded Alvarado's arrival; these guerilla mobilizations of the countryside threatened to send armed land surveyors to redefine local boundaries between ejido and hacienda.[69] In other words, land invasions are known to have occurred, to some extent, from the very first moments of the hacienda system, and continued through and beyond the Revolutionary period.

Hacienda owners and overseers were outraged by what they named as the vecinos' lack of respect for the rights of legitimate property. After vecinos entered the hacienda lands, they would typically install landmarks, in the form of stone cairns, or fences, to mark the land. They would then plant their milpa, sow seeds for other crops for harvest, and use the trees on the land to produce firewood and charcoal. The vecinos of Sitpach went so far as to seize a lime kiln and 1,500 loads of limestone from an hacienda belonging to Olegario Molina, which could be used to produce plaster and mortar for building construction—and warned that they would steal the next lime kiln the finca was making, too. Rodrigo Suarez, a representative of Molina, was outraged by this injustice: "[the vecinos] disturb the quiet, public and peaceful possession that he has had of these fincas, and they violate Articles 14 and 16 of the General Constitution of the Republic…"[70] Suarez, Molina, and other hacendados and their associates believed that the designation of ejidos

[68] Wells and Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval*, 179.
[69] Ibid., 199.
[70] Rodrigo Suarez to Agrarian Commission, 30 April 1918, Volume 1 file 17, AGE, CE, Mérida, Yucatán.

and the occupation of private, or particular, property, was the exclusive prerogative of the state government, and that the actions of the vecinos were therefore acts of theft. Yet, accusations of theft were met only with an insistence from the pueblo that they had a right to the land.

The frequent and determined land invasions carried out by groups of vecinos into their neighboring haciendas shows that Maya communities did not, at least fully, assimilate to the dominant ideology in Yucatán of private property rights. The Maya did indeed maintain their separate cultural heritage, founded in extended family structures and syncretic religious practices. Their culture was also maintained through language; in 1895, seven out of ten citizens of Yucatán spoke Maya.[71] Thus, the retention of a separate culture also likely enabled Maya rural communities to retain their understanding of the land. In an old Maya story, "El hombre de la tierra" ("The Man of the Earth"), a man wanders away from his milpa and arrives at the milpa of the god of rain, mistakenly thinking he has arrived back at his own. He stays and works for the rain god, comically dying and being resurrected each time he completes a task incorrectly. In the story, he does not return to his own milpa for fifteen years, by which time it has become useless, overgrown by bush.[72] "No land is bad if it is duly worked," said Señor Enrique Jiménez at the First Worker's Congress in Motul.[73] In a communalist understanding of land, what mattered was less *who* the land belonged to and more *how* it was used. After the Man of the Earth's milpa plot was abandoned for fifteen years, it did not really matter to him that it was his in some nominal sense, because it had lost its utility.

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[71] Wells and Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval*, 166.
[72] Manuel José Andrade, Hilaria Máas Collí, and Miguel Güémez Pineda, eds. "El hombre de la tierra," in *Cuentos mayas yucatecos =: U tsikbalilo'ob mayab (uuchben tsikbalo'ob)* 2. edición. (Mérida, Yucatán, Méx: Ediciones de la Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Centro de Investigaciones Regionales "Dr. Hideyo Noguchi," Unidad de Ciencias Sociales, 1999): 27-41.
[73] Congreso Obrero (1st : 1918 : Motul, México), *Primer Congreso Obrero Socialista Celebrado En Motul, Estado de Yucatán : Bases Que Se Discutieron y Aprobaron* (México: Centro de Estudios Históricos del Movimiento Obrero Mexicano, 1977), 22.

Vecino invasions questioned the border between the pueblo and the hacienda, centering on disputes about where to draw the line between land belongings. In this constant negotiation of space, vecinos often claimed that the land they had invaded was their ejido, drawing on alleged authorization from the Agrarian Committee or on a collective recounting of history of the land. In these exchanges, the borders between private and communal were always in flux; the fences built by the vecinos of Sitpach on the finca Chichí were knocked down by the administrator of the hacienda, only to be rebuilt by the administrator, upon orders, months later.[74] Landmarks were removed and remade. In 1920, vecinos of the pueblo of Seyé entered an estate, the finca Eknakán in the municipality of Acanceh, whose owner had recently died and, without authorization, measured the lands of the estate to prepare for its distribution.[75] In one case, government propaganda agents Felipe Carrillo and Felipe Valencia arrived in the pueblo of Teya, where Alvarado had ordered that the vecinos of Teya leave the private lands that they had invaded. Carrillo and Valencia, who claimed they were commissioned by the government and the Agrarian Commission to resolve the matter, declared upon arrival that Alvarado's order was revoked. Instead, they authorized the vecinos of Teya to seize considerable portions of the finca Dzuiché. To redraw the line between private and the communal lands, Carrillo and Valencia dug a ditch in the ground, asserting the new boundary of the pueblo.[76]

The fears of the hacendados over the sanctity of their property rights, particularly during the Revolutionary period's profound political transformation of the state, betrayed their existential anxieties about the future of the henequen industry and the real threat that land invasions posed to their economic prosperity. When their lands were invaded, hacendados implored the state government to mediate the situation or deploy military commanders to

[74] Luis D. Molina to Salvador Alvarado, 4 October 1916, Volume 206 file 56, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[75] Ricardo Molina to Antonio Ancona Albertoa, 25 August 1920, Volume 534 file 19, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[76] Gustavo Molina Font to Salvador Alvarado, 6 February 1917, Volume 209 file 46, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.

demand that residents leave their private lands. The hacendados wrote desperately and often to Alvarado in letters that I primarily draw on in this section. While they still hoped that the state would defend their property rights, hacendados grew increasingly uneasy. Gradually, the Agrarian Commission and its quasi-vigilante propagandists, as well as the first local ligas de resistencia, gained the authority to rule in favor of the campesinos through legal routes. In a nervous letter to Alvarado in 1916, Gustavo Molina Font, acting representative of the owner of the fincas Kancabchen, Quiché, and San Simon Cabil denounced the vecinos of three separate pueblos for trespassing onto his lands and "committing real damage" through their slash-and-burn agricultural methods. These vecinos sowed their seeds and milpa the previous year, in 1915, and intended to burn and take over new expansions of land in 1916. Molina Font notes carefully that 2,872 *mecates* had been stolen and burned in 1915, and 7,034 *mecates* would be affected in 1916. "As you can see, Señor governor," Molina Font wrote, "the extension they are now trying to cut down…are much greater than last year…If things continue this way the forests that constitute the greatest wealth of the haciendas mentioned will have disappeared."[77] The seizing of the forests by vecinos was particularly contentious since the fuel source was needed by rasping machines to process henequen in the hacienda factories. Molina Font's concerns echo hacendado worries that emerged throughout the region in these years: that bad interpretations of the Revolution by workers and vecinos, manifesting in protests and land invasions and supported by the administration in Mérida, would spell the destruction of henequen, or the great wealth of the state.

Land invasion was not only a practice of material necessity, but also of political visioning. What the hacendados viewed as theft of private land and privately owned resources, the vecinos saw as a reclamation of communal land and resources of which they had been

[77] Gustavo Molina Font to Salvador Alvarado, 31 October 1916, Volume 209 file 46, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.

historically dispossessed. When Alvarado visited the pueblo of Hunucmá in May of 1915, the vecinos handed him a petition, substantiated with three hundred signatures. This petition requested a return of land to the pueblo through a recounting of the local history of their town and the surrounding lands. The lands the petition called for the return of were the woodlands, which were still known in Hunucmá by the name of "El Común" ("The Commons"). Through remembering the history of their locality's lands as one of dispossession, the vecinos positioned their struggle as one of political hope, rather than of brazen criminality or theft.[78]

The strategic political tact of the vecinos was strengthened by the institution of the Law of Idle Lands as well as the increased influence and presence of the local ligas de resistencia, which provided a platform for vecino demands after their creation by the Partido Socialista de Yucatán (which would later become the PSSE) in 1917. In most historical accounts of this period of political and economic transformation, scholars fixate on the activities of the PSSE and the failure or success of the ligas de resistencia and the revolutionaries in Mérida to mobilize the Maya masses. However, as we have seen, the land invasions of the vecinos, which defied private property rights of the elites and reclaimed pieces of communal land so often that it may even have been considered commonplace, did not rely on a political party and preceded the formation of the ligas. It was instead the political party that in large part rose from these political actions of resistance and reclamation.

Further, not all land acquisition victories of the pueblo were mediated by the Party. In 1915, prior to the creation of the ligas, the persistence of land invaders in Hunucmá demonstrated such a victory. Ramón García Núñez, director of the state Agrarian Commission, initially attempted to dissuade the land invaders by dismissing their claims of right to the land and the communal history they had compiled in their petition. Yet, García's dismissal failed to

[78] Eiss, *In the Name of El Pueblo*, 114-115.

convince the land invaders to leave their reclaimed lands and he found himself helpless to resolve the conflict between communal and private. Finally, García conceded. Acknowledging his defeat, he declared that "we must legalize the way people are laboring in Hunucmá" and granted the Hunucmá vecinos ten thousand hectares of public lands.[79]

The ten thousand hectares were won through the vecinos' grassroots reclamation: by challenging private henequen production through land invasions, the vecinos forced the government to contend with their political demands. This land was granted to the vecinos "as definitive property, to possess in common."[80] Through their invocation of the woodlands as the site of historical contest between the communal and the private, the vecinos realized the woodlands as a site of future contest as well. As such, the struggles of vecinos for communal land anticipated the implementation of the ligas de resistencia. "It must be noted, deputies," as said Felipe Carrillo in 1920, "that the Socialist Party has not come from the cities of Yucatán, it has not gone from the cities to the countryside, but rather from the *countryside to the cities*" (emphasis my own).[81]

Ligas and the Law of Idle Lands

The local ligas de resistencia, formed in 1917 and gaining authority under the governorship of Felipe Carrillo in 1921, were the network through which the Socialist Party functioned. The ligas are estimated to have had between 60,000 and 80,000 members across the state. Weekly assemblies of the Liga Central attracted 800 to 1,000 attendees; in medium sized pueblos, such as Acanceh, attendance was typically 400 to 500; in smaller pueblos, there were

[79] Ibid., 119.
[80] Ibid.
[81] *Diario de Debates del Congreso de la Unión*, 2 September 1920, as quoted in Paoli and Montalvo, *El Socialismo Olvidado de Yucatán*, 127.

generally 200 attendees per meeting.[82] Ligas facilitated local infrastructure programs, the creation of new rural schools following the principles of the *escuela racionalista*, Maya cultural programs, and women's rights initiatives. Critically, ligas advocated for the pueblo on the question of land.

Image 4. An assembly of the liga de resistencia of Temax, 1923. (Source: Joseph, Revolution from without, 221).

G.M. Joseph, in an important contribution to the scholarship on the PSSE and their ligas de resistencia, argues that the networks of ligas relied on the Party's alliances with *caciques* (local power brokers).[83] *Caciques* were local strongmen who used nominal politics and a connection with the PSSE to consolidate power in their communities and chase their own agendas. Many of these caciques were Maya vecinos who began as jornaleros or milperos and subsequently rose to power. However, once in a position of political authority, caciques did not

[82] Paoli and Montalvo, *El Socialismo Olvidado de Yucatán*, 173.
[83] See Joseph, *Revolution from without*, Chapter 7.

hesitate to betray the interests of their community. In one such case, a cacique who claimed to be a Socialist and was the *comisario municipal*, or municipal delegate, of the infamous sugar plantation Catmís in the southeast of the state, was discovered in 1922 to be collaborating with the hacendado of Catmís in his brazen exploitation of the sugar workers. In this case, Felipe Carrillo removed the cacique from power and created a liga on the hacienda. In more benign cases, however, Carrillo used the existing authority of caciques in their communities to his advantage, often based on commandeering force and small politics.

However, existing cacique power in the countryside was not the only structure that underlaid the creation of the ligas. Past vecino land invasions, worker protests, and pre-existing campesino relationships precipitated the Socialist Party and made the implementation of the ligas possible, creating the popular base whose aims were increasingly intertwined with those of the Party. Juan Tún, municipal delegate of Hacienda Oxcúm (see Chapter 2), is an example of a militant campesino whose influence and authority preceded the involvement of the liga in the affairs of the jornaleros on the hacienda. Tún would not be considered a cacique as such; he was concerned, as far as we can tell from the historical record, only with the protection of the rights of his fellow workers and had no ulterior political ambition. Yet, his grassroots leadership was critical for the victory of the workers as well as the involvement of the liga on the hacienda.

The rise of the ligas gave a new legitimacy and power to the land invasions of the vecinos, who struggled to retain their communal lands in the northwestern henequen zone. The ligas also uplifted the vecinos' claims that the lands they invaded belonged to them, based on historic precedent. Such a close and critical relationship between the ligas and the pueblo is exemplified in the case of the 1918 land invasion of the finca Chichí by the vecinos of Sitpach. "The liga of resistencia of this pueblo notifies you to please suspend your cutting of firewood

and burning of charcoal within the old ejidos of this locality," read a 1918 letter addressed to the administrator of the finca Chichí, "you are hereby informed that you do not have the right to intervene within these, because the lands belong to the pueblo of Sitpach."[84] The vecinos of Sitpach had invaded the lands of Chichí two years prior, erecting fences and carrying loads of firewood and charcoal to Sitpach in carriages. When the administrator of the hacienda tore down their fences, destroying 30 mecates of the lands cultivated by the vecinos, the military commander of Tixkokob visited the hacienda with the municipal agent of Sitpach and 30 vecinos. The vecinos explained that although the lands belonged to Chichí according to property titles, they were historically ejidos of Sitpach, and verified this by showing the military commander old landmarks. The vecinos had asked for the lands from the hacienda administrator and overseer, received a resounding no, and then decided to invade the land regardless.[85] With this evidence at hand, local politicians and the liga defended the interests of the vecinos and the land they claimed to be their ejido. The 1918 letter from the liga de resistencia of Sitpach was sent by the municipal delegate of Sitpach, Anastasio Dzul, and signed by the propaganda Agent of Reclamation and Work, Carlos Pacheco, demonstrating the strength of the pro-communalist alliance formed by local political leaders.[86]

The ligas not only advocated for land invasions, but, in fact, depended on them. The treasury of the liga in Hunucmá was funded by the sale of wood and charcoal grown on communal lands, many of which were cultivated by the pueblo on hacienda property.[87] Thus, from a position of both ideological and pragmatic necessity, liga leaders became "aggressive advocates" in conflicts over the woodlands.[88] Still, tensions occasionally arose between the

[84] Liga de resistencia of Sitpach to Rodrigo Suarez, 9 May 1918, Volume 1 file 18, AGE, CE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[85] N. Arceo to Salvador Alvarado, 19 October 1916, Volume 206 file 56, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[86] Rodrigo Suarez to Agrarian Commission, 11 May 1918, Volume 1 file 17, AGE, CE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[87] Eiss, *In the Name of El Pueblo*, 138.
[88] Ibid., 139.

leaders of the ligas and their membership, suggesting a disjunction in liga structure between the localized state apparatus and its members. The vecinos of Hunucmá rejected efforts of their liga to instate by-laws, insisting that "by-laws are not necessary in Socialist organizations, in which liberty alone should reign."[89] Discord within ligas suggests that while the ligas informed the political consciousnesses of the vecinos, the vecinos also informed the political practice of the ligas.

Consequently, the political subjecthood of vecinos as communalists was further articulated through liga structure. This structure was solidified as the Socialist Party evolved on a state-wide level. The Party was radicalized from the bottom up; in its later manifestations, it became concerned with revolution as an economic as well as political objective. Where Alvarado's Socialist Party sought harmony between labor and capital, as we observed in the case of Hacienda Oxcúm, the more radical PSSE under Carrillo sought to "express their conflict."[90] Francisco J. Paoli and Enrique Montalvo argue in their canonical text *El socialismo olvidado de Yucatán*, that through "conditions generated in a truly short period of time (1915-1918), the foundations of a much more advanced and radical struggle were laid. The Socialist Party of today was different from yesterday. It had been transformed in the heat of political struggle. From populist it became popular."[91]

The new commitment of the government to economic revolution was exemplified by the vitalization of the federal *Ley de tierras ociosas* in Yucatán during the Carrillo administration. The *Ley de tierras ociosas*, or the Law of Idle Lands, was introduced into Mexico first in the Agrarian Law of January 6, 1915. It reappeared in Article 27 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution, which proclaimed that the nation had the right to expropriate property in the service of public

[89] Ibid.
[90] Paoli and Montalvo, *El Socialismo Olvidado de Yucatán*, 165.
[91] Paoli and Montalvo, *El Socialismo Olvidado de Yucatán*, 128.

utility given that the original owner was compensated, and that the nation "had the right to impose on private property the modalities dictated by the public interest." Most critically, the Law of Idle Lands of 1920 furthered the aims of its predecessors to declare the cultivation of farmland to be a public utility.[92] However, resistance, debate, and political tumult on the federal level inhibited the realization of the radical potential of this law.[93] In 1922 and 1923, Carrillo reappropriated this law, which was created by but rarely used by the Constitutionalists, so that the peninsula was able to feed itself. Self-sustenance, which would be achieved through biodiversification and more efficient and effective maize cultivation, was a primary ambition of Carrillo and the PSSE. The Law of Idle Lands, as utilized by Carrillo in Yucatán, allowed campesinos to sow their milpa on lands left uncultivated on neighboring haciendas. As dictated by the federal law, they would raise landmarks on the uncultivated land and plant on it for a year.

In Yucatán, vecinos and ligas used the Law of Idle Lands to further justify their claim to underutilized hacienda lands. In Izamal in 1920, a candidate of the Socialist Party led 65 vecinos in asking for *tierras ociosas* on various fincas in the municipality; the law gave the vecinos and Party officials a legal language to express their age-old demand for the commons.[94] This case, among many others, was dismissed for not complying exactly to the law. Other cases, however, were more successful, prompting the creation of a Special Department of Idle Lands. In one appeal to the department, vecinos submitted a petition to request idle lands to cultivate on Hacienda Cinta in the municipality of Mérida. The commissioners determined that the finca had

[92] Moisés González Navarro, "Las tierras ociosas," *Historia Mexicana*, April 1 (1977): 510 ; Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 245.
[93] Mexico, *Ley Agraria de 6 de Enero de 1915. Decreto Declarando de Utilidad Pública El Cultivo de Las Tierras Laborables Ociosas. Artículo 27 de La Constitución Política de Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Promulgada El 5 de Febrero de 1917. Consideraciones Acerca Del Artículo 27 Constitucional*. (Laws, Etc. Oaxaca: Talleres de Impr. y Encuadernación de J.S. Soto, 1921) ; Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 260-261.
[94] Mayor of Izamal to Antonio Ancona Albertoa, 13 October 1920, Volume 541 file 25, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.

"sufficient lands to sustain the henequen rasping machines," and it would not be detrimental to grant the requested 600 mecates of land to the vecinos.[95]

Some hacendados complained that the vecinos abused the Law; they often claimed that vecinos had crossed municipal lines to invade their lands, which thereby negated their request for an idle land grant. In other cases, hacendados protested that their fincas did not have enough firewood to support henequen production, or that the appropriation of the forest would harm the workers on the hacienda, who also cultivated their milpa on the outskirts of the hacienda land.[96] Despite the anxieties of the hacendados, the Law of Idle Lands alongside Carrillo's ambitious land program of *jueves agrarios* (agrarian Thursdays), through which new ejido grants would be announced and delivered on a weekly basis, facilitated an monumental process of land distribution and reallocation.[97] The land invasions that vecinos had waged into the private hacienda lands were thus adopted into the structure of the PSSE in the form of the Law of Idle Lands and ejidal grants.

The Law of Idle Lands also realized the call of the pueblo for the historical recognition of nineteenth century Maya land dispossession in Yucatán. The name of the law and its invocation of *tierras ociosas*, which literally translates to empty lands, recalls the language of the 1825 *Ley de colonización*, which was justified through a characterization of the woodlands as *tierras baldías* (wastelands, or vacant lands).[98] In the 1920 Law of Idle Lands, the 1825 *Ley de colonización* was turned on its head. What previously constituted the "empty" had been transformed: the hoarded and underutilized woodlands of the private hacienda could be repossessed for the common good of the pueblo. With the subversion of the historical

[95] Commissioner to the Special Department of Idle Lands, 15 January 1920, Volume 550 file 34, AGE, PE, Mérida, Yucatán.
[96] Ricardo Molina to Antonio Ancona Albertoa, 25 August 1920.
[97] This land distribution far exceeded that of Campeche and Morelos combined, constituting approximately 20% of hectares of land distributed in the entire Republic in 1923. Source: Joseph, *Revolution from without*, Table on 306.
[98] See Chapter 1.

encroachment of the henequen hacienda onto communal milpa lands, the social and economic hierarchy began to shift under the feet of hacendados and campesinos alike.

The utopian moment

"Yucatán is Maya," wrote Felipe Carrillo Puerto in a piece published after his death in 1924. He continued:

> What has the Indian gained from the revolution in Yucatán? That must be the basis of any honest judgment upon our work. Our first task has been to distribute the common lands, or *ejidos*, to our people. The ownership of land, as of old, by the Indian communities is the fundamental contribution of the revolution to date. We are taking these common lands from the estates, leaving the original owner at least five hundred *hectares*…The land is not given to any individual. The Mayas are a communal people, who have a strong group responsibility. The lands are common lands and belong to the community. Each community has an agrarian commission which sees to the distribution of the land as the needs of the community determine. No man has the right to either sell or buy communal land; he has only the right to work and enjoy the fruits thereof. The product is his. The soil belongs to the community.[99]

In 1923, Felipe Carrillo issued two decrees that precipitated his fall. They aimed to take ambitious strides to further the Marxist program of the PSSE. The first, the Law Enabling the Expropriation of Abandoned Haciendas, was worded to read as an extension of the Law of Idle Lands. In a seemingly logical extension of Obregón's 1920 law, the new legislation would restore abandoned haciendas to productivity and provide a source of income for laid-off workers. Hidden within the law, however, was the caveat that these haciendas would be run through collectively by the workers. The second piece of legislation supported the first: 25 percent of all henequen profits would be directed into the workers' henequen cooperatives. In this model, henequen lands would not be reclaimed by milpa lands, but rather, the private lands would be communalized.[100] These decrees would have revolutionized the life of the campesino, using the

[99] Felipe Carrillo Puerto, "The New Yucatan: A Message to All Americans from the Martyred Maya Leader," *The Survey* LII, no. 3 (May 1924).
[100] Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 260-262.

logic of "*tierras ociosas*" or "*haciendas ociosas*" to give the Maya access to henequen, "the great wealth of the state." If the haciendas had been socialized, the Maya may have been economically and socially empowered for the first time in their history, and henequen may have been eventually redeemed from its role as a capitalist commodity…

However, this socialist future was decimated before it could be imagined in full. The backlash from hacendados and Mexico City was quick and severe. Two weeks after Carrillo announced his decrees, his government was overthrown and Carrillo was killed in a collusion between Yucatecan hacendados and De la Huerta insurgent forces (see Joseph, *Revolution from without*, 264-265).

Carrillo was killed alone, unaided by his campesino supporters. However, the campesinos of the rural ligas were a civilian force: they did not know how to shoot a gun, and had, in fact, been dispossessed by the federal government of all weapons except for the machete during a bout of military violence several years earlier. The machete with which the Maya had been left was, of course, to be used for cutting henequen. Thus, Diego Rivera noted that "when the kingdom of the executioners has passed like a summer cloud, the pueblo returns to work [Carrillo sacrificed himself alone with several of his companions]…but this does not mean that the machete will stop cutting the weeds."[101]

[101] Raquel Tibol, "Un diálogo de ultratumba: Diego y Carrillo Puerto," (*Siempre Adelante*, 1969) as quoted in Paoli and Montalvo, El Socialismo Olvidado de Yucatán, 175.

Conclusion: History as a Commons

> "Recovery of the resources that have always been usurped is recovery of our destiny"
>
> -Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America*

After the death of Felipe Carrillo, the utopian vision of the PSSE began to evaporate. As skeptics of campesino mobilization during this period have well-elaborated, the Maya who comprised the 80,000 members of the ligas de resistencia across the state did not seize the moment to rise up or defend the ambitions of the Party. However, this does not mean that the mobilization of the campo before this unraveling of the Revolution was nonexistent or unimportant: it simply indicates that the project of the PSSE, and of many campesino militants, was incomplete, which has been further explained in other scholarship.[102]

The political formations and mobilizations we have here studied were part of a long story of Maya resistance on the Yucatán peninsula and an integral part in the formation of the Revolution during these years: "As Lenin argues in relation to the Paris Commune, it was not possible that such an experience had the immediate goal of complete socialist revolution. It did not even have the sufficient elements to consider such a revolution. But it was about advancing in the process of class struggle."[103]

To approach a popular history, we must intuitively begin with how people within history understood themselves—and their own histories. The framework of milpa and henequen, or rather, land conflict, to engage the Yucatecan campesino as a historical subject arises from the campesino's usage of this same history. As we have seen, the political imaginations of

[102] See Joseph, *Revolution from Without*.
[103] Paoli and Montalvo, *El Socialismo Olvidado de Yucatán*, 164.

campesinos during the Revolutionary period grew from their community histories of Maya land dispossession since colonization and specifically from the growth of the hacienda as a capitalist commercial export system in the 1820s. These community histories led vecinos, in the context of Revolutionary upheaval, to reclaim and cultivate lands that they considered to be their historic ejidos. On haciendas, jornaleros drew from this same ethos to radically reinterpret and reconstruct the limited revolutionary reforms that they had been granted by Alvarado's administration. Through both vecino land invasion and worker protest, Maya campesinos built sophisticated and effective political collectives. They drew on a variety of tactics to struggle for their material needs, which most often, in the cases we have examined, were interwoven with organic forms of political consciousness.

Thus, we understand that the revolutionary process in Yucatán from 1915-1923 was complex, constantly invented in spaces of exchange between the capital-R Revolutionary "above" and the popular "below." It was through these spaces of exchange in the Alvarado years that the PSSE, which envisioned transformative economic revolution, was born.

As Silvia Federici writes, "history itself is a common, even when it reveals the ways in which we have been divided, provided it is narrated through a multiplicity of voices. History is our collective memory, our extended body connecting us to a vast expanse of struggles that give meaning and power to our political practice."[104]

For the Maya, indeed, history itself was a commons, used as a collective tool against the ongoing process of primitive accumulation of milpa communal lands. In the Revolutionary period, wherein debt peonage was ended and wage labor was more decisively imported as a ruling force, class struggle emerged in its more classic forms, as witnessed on Hacienda Oxcúm.

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[104] Silvia Federici and Peter Linebaugh, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Kairos. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 86.

However, the invention of class as such did not replace, nor resolve, the decolonial struggle that had been long-fought against forces of primitive accumulation. Instead, class struggle and decolonial struggle coalesced into the agrarian Marxist platform of the PSSE and into the new manifestations of the campesino struggle for their repossession of the pueblo. For the Maya in Yucatán, the commons of history instrumentally shaped their political practice during the Revolution against capitalist privatization and theft in its new forms. It was in the pueblo's commons of history that their collective political struggle for the commons of the land was imagined.

Image 5. Names carved into henequen leaves, including Moo Uci, a Maya name. Photo by Lula O'Donnell.

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