# The Apostle of Democracy Died for Nothing

Ike Chen

HIS 352F

4 December 2023

When Francisco Madero issued his Plan of San Luis against reigning dictator Porfirio Díaz, he could hardly have predicted the outcome of the revolution that he heralded. Within the span of a few years, he had been unceremoniously executed and his followers, now enemies, had turned their rifles on each other. When the dust settled, the Constitutionalists under Venustiano Carranza had won, yet even he was executed in 1920. The subsequent rule by generals and by the Sonoran Dynasty were ended by the election of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934, who ushered in one last wave of reform before, in 1940, his term ended, and with it, the revolution. Whether these revolutionaries truly brought about a social revolution or not has major implications on governmental legitimacy; when so many people bled and died for revolutionary ideals, it is critical for a truly popular government to live up to those ideals, lest it be swept away. Unfortunately, by Theda Skocpol's definition, the Mexican Revolution only partially qualifies as a social revolution, as despite significant reforms, the revolutionary government failed to achieve the most important one of all, the rallying cry of the revolution: democracy.

Briefly put, Skocpol's social revolution has two key components: it must create a centralised regime and significantly change the societal balance of power. The new regime must achieve the "extreme rationalization and centralization of state institutions," creating a powerful government (effectiveness unnecessary). These revolutions must be led from the political margins, leading to the "removal… elimination or diminution of a landed upper class" from economic-political structures.[1] It suffices to treat the Mexican Revolution as having four major economic-political goals in the direction of societal restructuring: land, labour, secular, and democratic reforms. If, by 1940, the revolutionaries did not complete all of these objectives, then they did not successfully inaugurate a social revolution, as the traditional upper classes would have remained in power.

[1] Theda Skocpol, "France, Russia, China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18, no. 2 (1976): 178.

It is self-evident that the Mexican Revolution was led originally from the political margins. Simply put, anyone who did not support Díaz or who was not supported by him was on the political margins; as the Díaz regime consisted of large landowners and technocrats, the lower classes would be considered political marginals.[2] Joining the revolutionaries were groups from simple peasants and labourers, who wanted corrections to their poverty, to the middle classes, who desired political power.[3] Even though Madero himself was a wealthy landowner, he still was excluded from power due to Díaz's stranglehold on politics. The Mexican Revolution was therefore not some revolution-from-above scenario. Ignoring Madero's failure to remain in power, it is clear that his supporters, at least, were from the political margins, and hence his revolution had its origins as a social revolution. Following Madero, the distinction is largely unnecessary, as the previously marginalised classes should theoretically be in power at this point. Whether this is true, and whether they created a centralised government, are the next considerations.

Regarding centralisation, the revolutionaries successfully created a new regime with the power necessary to enforce reforms. After the chaotic warfare of the 1910s, Plutarco Elías Calles co-opted the Mexican masses into his regime in order to create a resistant state that could weather the challenges it faced. [4] This did not mean that he, or subsequent presidents, became absolute rulers. Rather, as his sobriquet of *el Jefe Máximo* suggests, it meant that he and his successors were actually in control of the military-political machinery, unlike his predecessor Carranza, *el Primer Jefe*. In particular, the creation of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) as a unifying organisation, succeeded by Cárdenas' Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), was a key component of this success. Even though regional warlords held sway across Mexico and revolutionaries continued to be divided over ideology, more and

[2] Dolores Butterfield, "The Situation in Mexico," *The North American Review* 196, no. 684 (1912): 650–651.
[3] Dorothy W. Douglas, "Land and Labor in Mexico," *Science & Society* 4, no. 2 (1940): 128.
[4] Richard Tardanico, "State, Dependency, and Nationalism: Revolutionary Mexico, 1924-1928," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 3 (1982): 421.

more groups saw participation in the government as a better solution for their grievances than military conflict (which became increasingly difficult due to Calles' vigilance and military restructuring).[5] As a result of this governmental expansion, the government was not reliant on any singular base of support; Calles could call upon the peasants and the labourers to defend his rule from disgruntled warlords, while his soldiers could crush any rioting strikers or peasants, and because they were all part of his government they all theoretically owed any advancement in status and wealth to him and his programme. The rule of the *Maximato* was obviously not monolithically powerful; Calles and his successors faced serious threats to their authority, but, unlike Madero and Carranza before them, they managed to stay in power.[6] In this sense, although they may not have truly been loyal, Calles left for Cárdenas the grand inheritance of a bureaucracy and army in lockstep, which could not act independently of the government without being checked somehow. [7] Regardless of how creating a government party stifled any budding democratic reforms, this necessary step resulted in the creation a revolutionary government that had real power to effect change after a decade of war, coups, and rebellions, thus laying the foundations for a genuine social revolution to take place.

The first revolutionary criterion, land reform, was generally a success. This includes the conflict over Mexico's resources, especially natural resources, since this involved the ownership of Mexican land by foreign corporations. The conflict here lay between the entrenched landlords and foreign interests on one end and the agrarian poor, including smallholders, peasants, landless labourers, sharecroppers, and others tied to the land, on the other. Although the early revolutionaries had recognised the need for land reform, the pace of these reforms was pitifully slow, and it was only during the presidency of Cárdenas that there was any significant land redistribution. By the end of his presidency, even though most land

[5] Peter Calvert, "The Institutionalisation of the Mexican Revolution," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 11, no. 4 (1969): 507; Tardanico, "State, Dependency, and Nationalism: Revolutionary Mexico, 1924-1928," 419.
[6] James W. Wilkie, "The Meaning of the Cristero Religious War Against the Mexican Revolution," *Journal of Church and State* 8, no. 2 (1966): 228.
[7] Tardanico, "State, Dependency, and Nationalism: Revolutionary Mexico, 1924-1928," 422.

was still owned by large landowners, almost half of the actually productive land was held by the peasants and producing a majority of Mexico's agricultural exports. This was a structured, government-driven process: claimants needed to petition for land, and an agricultural commission would partition the land as it chose (under Cárdenas, usually in favour of the peasants).[8] In addition to land redistribution, Cárdenas sought to improve the productivity of landholders with credit banks, which provided loans for equipment and seeds to peasants and *ejidatarios*, agricultural commissions, which provided education on better agricultural techniques, and irrigation expansion, which increased the amount of productive land.[9] Of course, Mexico did not undergo a Stalinist-style land reform spree; this was never the intent of the mainstream revolutionaries and was probably literally impossible with the American government's watchful eyes across the Río Grande. What actually took place was a rebalancing of economic power. Before and during the early stages of the revolution, almost all agricultural workers were landless. By 1938, almost a million peasant families became landowners at the expense of the landlords.[10] Even if this did not break the power of the large landowners, it surely diminished their influence; the mere fact of revolutionary expropriation points to the shifting balance of political power. When even borderline serfs can petition the government for land, the political balance has clearly shifted to favour the poor. Thus, the revolution's land reform was, although not a dramatic success, a success regardless that enabled the poor peasants and smallholders to achieve and exercise a surprising amount of economic and political power.

Control of Mexico's resources, however, was much less of a success. Calles was the first to reassert national control of land and national resources, although he was extremely limited by American interests. This is generally an important caveat to any and all reforms, not only nationalisation; as long as the hemispheric hegemon surveyed warily for a socialist

[8] Douglas, "Land and Labor in Mexico," 135.
[9] Ibid, 136.
[10] Ibid, 134–1315.

menace, there was a limit to anything that could be done. For example, despite attempts to regulate the critical electrical and mining industries, they remained under the control of foreign powers.[11] Cárdenas' famous oil nationalisation of 1938 was perhaps the only major victory in this regard: it was an unusually extreme anti-American action and proved that there was a limit to American power (especially given that the Great Depression was happening at the time).[12] It was clearly possible, therefore, that the government could have done more to assert Mexican sovereignty and, given the nationalisation of oil, a nationalisation of energy and/or transportation probably should have followed naturally. That it did not is a very poor reflection on the revolutionaries' intentions; consolidation or fear can only waive so much inaction, especially in such key industries. To the extent that foreign interests controlled Mexico, however, oil nationalisation clearly proved that they could not do so forever, but that this power was not exercised more points towards failure in exercising sovereignty and significantly tempers the other successes of land reform.

The next revolutionary criterion, labour reform, was also largely a success. The conflict here lay between powerful industrial interests on one end and labourers, both urban and rural, on the other. From the moment that the Red Battalions allied with Carranza, the labour movement was largely suppressed and subservient to the government's will. This move placed some of the labour movement's leadership under Carranza's control, and those who remained outside were shortly suppressed once they became too dissentious.[13] This state of simultaneous co-optation and repression persisted through the years, especially through the *Maximato*, and did not portend an improvement in the status of labourers; in fact, it weakened them into near-irrelevance.[14] Thus, the incorporation of the labour movement in the government in itself did not mean labour reform; the constitution had labour provisions and a

[11] Douglas, "Land and Labor in Mexico," 127.
[12] Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994): 87.
[13] Raul Trejo Delarbe and Anibal Yanez, "The Mexican Labor Movement: 1917-1975," *Latin American Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (1976): 134–135.
[14] Douglas, "Land and Labor in Mexico," 137.

law existed to enforce them, but oftentimes it simply was not enforced.[15] Again, it was not until the election of Cárdenas that anything changed. The specific course of events may have been pragmatic in nature, but the consequences remained: when Calles tried to exercise his influence by denigrating striking labourers, Cárdenas openly approved of the strikes and thus won the strikers' support. The weakening alliance between Calles and labour eventually allowed Cárdenas to expel Calles and his political clique from Mexico.[16] Cárdenas may only have courted the labourers to ensure his government's stability and to wean himself away from Calles, but this, unlike the years before where labour and state were wedded unhappily, represented a genuine grassroots support for the government. Naturally, Cárdenas rewarded his supporters with increases in wages, decreases in hours, enhancements in job security, and actual enforcement of labour laws and contracts, but this did not end foreign dominance over Mexican industry, nor did it remove the capitalists out of power.[17] These regulations were hardly unique to Mexico or any other state and were absolutely not radical by any means, but the revolutionaries did not seek to destroy the capitalist class. They sought to improve the livelihood of labourers and break their overwhelming dependence on capital for survival, which they did, if the labour codes Cárdenas implemented are any indication. In this sense, the industrialists, although still powerful and influential, had become much less privileged than before, especially since the labour movement under Cárdenas was actually supported by the government rather than merely co-opted into it.

The next revolutionary criterion, secular reforms, was mostly a failure. The conflict here lay between the Catholic Church ("the Church") on one end and various anti-clerical groups, such as revolutionary educators and agrarians, on the other. Educational policy is an extremely important part of secularism but will be considered separately, given its wide-ranging impacts on culture and socioeconomic standing. The Church was not supportive of

[15] Delarbe and Yanez, "The Mexican Labor Movement: 1917-1975," 138.
[16] Ibid, 140–141.
[17] Douglas, "Land and Labor in Mexico," 127, 140; Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" 101.

the revolutionaries; it in fact supported Madero's overthrow and had been embroiled in conflict with the revolutionary government ever since its establishment. This conflict continued with the extremely anti-clerical Constitution of 1917, which greatly limited the independence and the authority of the Church.[18] Calles then enacted extremely anticlerical laws to enforce this, ending religious education and requiring priestly registration; the former was intended to break the Church's influence on the Mexican identity, and the latter was intended to prevent the Church from operating autonomously or effectively.[19] The ensuing rebellion was defeated, and anticlerical laws continued to be enforced until Cárdenas came to an agreement with the Church to expand popular support.[20] This may seem like a victory for secularism, but its success cannot be measured in the same manner as that of other reforms. The Church, like the landowning class to which it was often allied, held no political office and was opposed by the state, but it was unique as a cultural institution that could survive and project influence even (or especially) under extreme persecution. Thus, its dominance over the home, work, and education would not easily be destroyed without a radical change in the Mexican identity itself, such as an outright replacement of the Church, which completely failed.[21] Thus, the Church survived as an institution with the ability to projects its views upon the Mexican populace, especially due to its pragmatic collusion with Cárdenas, and in this regard secular reforms failed.

This judgement against secularism does not consider educational reforms, which were more successful. To be sure, socialist education was total failure given its unpopularity, and thus there was no radical restructuring of the Mexican identity. Still, what education presented was the ability to rise socially and economically, which was being hindered by the landholding class and the Church. In fact, agrarian opposition to the Church followed

[18] Wilkie, "The Meaning of the Cristero Religious War Against the Mexican Revolution," 216.
[19] Ibid, 222.
[20] Ibid, 233.
[21] Alan Knight, "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (1994): 402, 416–417.

naturally from the Chruch's domineering role in daily life: peasants worked whenever the Church ordered them to, for landlords who the Church supported, and without much opportunity for advancement due to Church-controlled education.[22] Although socialist education itself failed to win over the population, the establishment of schools (especially rural schools) all across the country had another impact: it represented government investment into regions long-ignored and gave people there a chance to advance economically and politically.[23] By Cárdenas' presidency, illiteracy had been reduced to fifty-nine percent, from seventy-four percent before the revolution.[24] This was by no means an astounding accomplishment, but more important were the ties established between state and rural poor through this project. With these financial investments came revolutionary teachers with governmental ties and leadership credentials, who often supported the claims of disgruntled agrarians.[25] In the sense that educational reform materially and culturally changed Mexico, the truth is that it clearly did not do enough, but in the sense that it more closely tied the state to the people and thus expanded their political power, it absolutely did.

The last revolutionary criterion, democracy, was a complete failure, and thus so was the revolution. The conflict here lay between the political classes on one end and all marginalised classes on the other. In essence, the question is whether or not the marginal revolutionaries who supported Madero actually came to wield true political power afterwards. The answer is obviously that they did not. Through every reform considered, there is a clear distinction between the government and the people who supported/were supported by it. When Cárdenas redistributed land, the peasants needed to petition commissions that could decide against popular will.[26] When Calles signed labour laws, he simultaneously crushed strikes and subordinated unions to his political machine, and Cárdenas probably only courted

[22] Ibid, 417.
[23] Ibid, 441–442.
[24] Porter, Eugene O. "Mexico's Socialistic Education." *The Historian* 6, no. 1 (1943): 48.
[25] Knight, "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940," 428, 440.
[26] Douglas, "Land and Labor in Mexico," 133.

labour when he needed support to free himself from Calles. When Calles attempted to wipe out the Church, he did so without the acquiescence of much of Mexico to violent results, and socialist education was never popular in the first place. There was no democracy here; the institutionalisation of the PNR-PRM, the inability of the Church to legally participate in politics, and the handpicked succession after the end of Cárdenas' presidency were clearly not liberal political processes. Thus, although the marginal classes exercised political power, they did not own any of it; all of these situations have in common that, although there were popular reforms (or not, in the case of secular reforms), actual execution was subject to the whims of the government, which did not always favour the marginal classes. Under Cárdenas, the peasants and the labourers held a uniquely privileged position that they exploited to their benefit, but they did not stand in the halls of power before, and they did not after. He may have presided over a period of unprecedented unity, thanks to his programme of mass mobilisation, but those masses were not autonomous or powerful enough to effect political change by themselves.[27] As a result, although revolutionary Mexico was far removed from Díaz's Mexico, one thing remained in common: the government held power jealously and granted it only to privileged classes, which disfavoured the marginal peasants and labourers, and that was the closest that the revolutionary government got to democracy.

1938 was the apex of Cárdenas' personal popularity, as well as that of the revolution itself. For a brief moment, Mexicans could claim that their state now owned one of their most valuable resources, that many of them now owned land when previously they did not, that they now had a minimum wage and maximum hours in their workweek, and that they now could freely receive a scientific education from public schools. At this critical juncture, Cárdenas and his government turned back. No other large-scale nationalisation took place. Labour laws remained limited by powerful industrial, often American, interests who nobody

[27] Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" 93.

wished to anger too much. The assault on the Church ended, and the schools which were to be used as weapons in this war appeared increasingly to have failed. Even the large-scale land reform that was so critical to Cárdenas' popularity slowed down and began to benefit the large landowners.[28] Skocpol's social revolution does not need to be completely successful, but it does need to incorporate the marginal classes into the government, and the failure of democracy prevented this from happening in a genuine, non-clientelistic manner. Mexico managed to create a centralised revolutionary government that was able to carry out genuine reforms, but stopped there. In 1940, Cárdenas left office, and with the end of his presidency came the end of a revolution. For the next sixty years, the PRM, eventually renamed to the Institutional Revolutionary Party, ruled over Mexico. Only two-thirds of its name was true: it may have been an institutional party, but it was not revolutionary. The martyrdom of Madero, which destroyed one institutional dictatorship, created only another institutional dictatorship.

[28] Ibid, 102.

Bibliography

Butterfield, Dolores. “The Situation in Mexico.” *The North American Review* 196, no. 684 (1912): 649–64. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25119878.

Calvert, Peter. “The Institutionalisation of the Mexican Revolution.” *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 11, no. 4 (1969): 503–17. https://doi.org/10.2307/165333.

Delarbe, Raul Trejo, and Anibal Yanez. “The Mexican Labor Movement: 1917-1975.” *Latin American Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (1976): 133–53. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633257.

Douglas, Dorothy W. “Land and Labor in Mexico.” *Science & Society* 4, no. 2 (1940): 127–52. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40399321.

Knight, Alan. “Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994): 73–107. http://www.jstor.org/stable/157859.

Knight, Alan. “Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940.” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (1994): 393–444. https://doi.org/10.2307/2517891.

Porter, Eugene O. “Mexico’s Socialistic Education.” *The Historian* 6, no. 1 (1943): 44–52. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24435961.

.

Skocpol, Theda. “France, Russia, China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18, no. 2 (1976): 175–210. http://www.jstor.org/stable/178128.

Tardanico, Richard. “State, Dependency, and Nationalism: Revolutionary Mexico, 1924-1928.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 3 (1982): 400–423. http://www.jstor.org/stable/178508.

Wilkie, James W. “The Meaning of the Cristero Religious War Against the Mexican Revolution.” *Journal of Church and State* 8, no. 2 (1966): 214–33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23913317.