

Popular Participation in State Formation: Land Reform in Revolutionary Mexico

HELGA BAITENMANN*

Abstract. Land reform efforts during the armed phase of the Mexican revolution (1910–20) remain largely overshadowed by the more dramatic events of the period. Based on records held in the Archivo General Agrario in Mexico City, this article shows how villagers in different parts of Mexico negotiated their claims to land with various revolutionary regimes during the armed struggle, with particular attention to the local committees created to measure land boundaries, conduct village censuses and distribute land. These negotiations between agrarian officials and villagers laid the foundations for the first post-revolutionary national administration. The emergent federal agrarian offices doubled as a legislative branch of government, assumed quasi-judicial functions and restricted the role of municipal and state governments – qualities that would characterise Mexico’s agrarian reform for the next 70 years. In highlighting the ways that early land reform efforts contributed to state formation, this article questions the current social science inclination to ‘decentre’ Mexico’s post-revolutionary regime.

Keywords: state formation, Mexican revolution, land reform, agrarian law, popular participation, federalism

Introduction

The relationship between local and national history is a recurring theme in the study of Mexico. In the last two decades, scholars focusing on nineteenth-century Mexico have unearthed local agency in new places, with villagers, local elites and state officials negotiating the terms of state projects, while

Helga Baitenmann is an associate fellow at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London. Email: helga.baitenmann@sas.ac.uk.

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those working on the twentieth century have identified more autonomous political spaces, postponing by several decades (or substantially questioning) the formation of a national post-revolutionary state. Between these two historiographical periods is the ‘long armed phase of the revolution’ (1910–20), a decade that remains largely unexplored with regard to subaltern participation in state formation.¹

Scholars have not studied the 1910–20 decade in terms of popular participation in land reform because villagers’ involvement in the armed struggle (or the absence thereof) has overshadowed more routine forms of negotiation, and few researchers have examined national institutions because it has been assumed that there were none: Porfirian offices were no longer functioning, and it would take decades to rebuild a new national administration in charge of education, labour law implementation and other social reforms. This decade also remains largely unexplored with regard to everyday forms of state formation because, just as the nineteenth century had its *leyenda negra* (the story of the supposedly universal dispossession of communal lands during the implementation of disentailment laws), the armed phase of the revolution has its own set of unquestioned certainties regarding land reform. In particular, scholars tell us that when Villistas and Zapatistas ceased being a major military threat, Venustiano Carranza derailed, halted and even reversed regional experiments with land reform.² They substantiate this argument by noting that Carranza issued few ‘presidential resolutions’ for land grants and restitutions.

If, however, one focuses on this decade not in terms of presidential resolutions but in terms of what James Scott calls the ‘administrative ordering of nature and society’, then one can begin to appreciate the significance of ongoing and widespread village negotiations over land rights.³ This article shows that, as they had during the nineteenth century and *despite* the revolutionary fighting, villagers throughout Mexico used the legislation available at the time to claim land rights; they participated in the formation of local committees in charge of measuring land boundaries, conducting village

¹ The quotation is from Friedrich Katz, ‘The Agrarian Policies and Ideas of the Revolutionary Mexican Factions Led by Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, and Venustiano Carranza’, in Laura Randall (ed.), *Reforming Mexico’s Agrarian Reform* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1996), p. 21.

² Villistas were followers of Pancho Villa, a former peon and outlaw turned provisional governor of Chihuahua (1913–14) and commander of the Division of the North. Zapatistas were followers of Emiliano Zapata, a horse trainer from Morelos who led the Liberating Army of the South. Carranza was a liberal *hacendado* who became governor of Coahuila, first chief of the Constitutionalist army, head of the Preconstitutionalist government and finally president of Mexico (1917–20).

³ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 4.

censuses and distributing land; and they flooded all available government offices (regardless of which revolutionary faction was in power) with requests, complaints and queries. These initiatives were often embedded in long-standing struggles within and between villages, which an embryonic federal agrarian administration struggled to rein in. Federal offices were, in turn, made relevant and strengthened by officials responding to multiple local demands and conflicts. In its efforts to control local committees and to arbitrate between contending village factions, this emergent national agrarian administration became a legislative branch for land-related matters, issued rulings as a quasi-judicial agency and greatly limited the role of municipal and state governments, thus shaping the character of post-revolutionary agrarian reform in important ways.

Most archive-based studies of land reform are local or regional in scope, a perspective privileged by a generation of scholars that has successfully 'decentred' what had mostly been portrayed as an all-powerful post-revolutionary state. This article is largely based on local *expedientes* (files) from across the country, now housed at the Archivo General Agrario (AGA) in Mexico City. In the nationwide perspective these archives afford, one cannot help but be struck by the sense that village histories of land reform were remarkably similar, and that land reform during the armed phase of the revolution was indeed widespread. These are observations that raise new questions about state formation in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Interchangeable Laws

Land reform efforts during the armed phase of the Mexican revolution were widespread, in part because many villagers were already petitioning for land prior to 1910. When different revolutionary factions presented their land reform proposals, villagers adopted them interchangeably in their continuing struggles over land. They were able to do so because, despite important philosophical, regional, ethnic and class differences, agrarian reform programmes were remarkably similar.⁴ They all retained key elements of the colonial criteria for the *pueblos de indios*, and they were based on nineteenth-century procedures for the disentanglement of communal lands. In fact, concepts that would later become highly politicised were much more fluid during this period, including the meaning of the term *ejido*, the difference between land grants and restitutions, and the question of whether to parcel land into private lots or hold it communally.

⁴ On differences between revolutionary agrarian projects, see Katz, 'Agrarian Policies and Ideas', pp. 21–34.

The ejido as the last redoubt

On the eve of the revolution, villagers throughout Mexico were petitioning the state for land. The AGA archives are filled with examples showing that, even while state officials were implementing the disentailment laws affecting church and Indian lands, villagers solicited and received land of various different types and categories. These included *fundos legales* (town sites, with houses and garden plots), *propios* (land held by the community treasury, usually rented out for income) and ejidos (public or communal pastures and woodlands). The land category most often petitioned for was the fundo legal; indeed, even hacienda workers (*gañanes*) solicited and received town sites from the authorities.⁵ But it was ejido lands that would play an important role in maintaining the colonial protections granted to Indian pueblos throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

The practice of soliciting, and often receiving, ejidos during the nineteenth century was geographically widespread. Examples include San Luis Potosí, where ‘village lands in haciendas’ (*poblados de haciendas*) managed to obtain the status of *municipio* (municipality) and thus lands for their fundo legal (or town base) and ejidos; Sonora, where the governor gave the towns of Navajoa and Tesia (Alamos) ‘four square leagues for ejidos’; and Puebla, where the Hueytlalpan municipality presented a land petition for ejidos.⁶ In the case of Papantla (Veracruz) in the 1870s, Emilio Kourí has shown that, before the division of communal lands, ‘850 hectares ... were designated as the ejido of Papantla and excluded from the land area to be divided into *conduñazgos*’.⁷ Similarly, Robert H. Holden demonstrates that the surveying companies in charge of privatising public lands ‘routinely respected land set aside as ejido or fundo legal’. In fact, the federal government would often give ‘land as ejido to pueblos that never had any, under the condition that the inhabitants

⁵ Stephen M. Perkins, ‘*Macebuales* and the Corporate Solution: Colonial Secessions in Nahua Central Mexico’, *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 21: 2 (2005), pp. 277–306.

⁶ On San Luis Potosí, see Juan Carlos Sánchez Montiel, ‘Efectos de la Ley Lerdo sobre los poblados de hacienda en el altiplano potosino’, in Antonio Escobar Ohmstede, Martín Sánchez Rodríguez and Ana Ma. Gutiérrez Rivas (eds.), *Agua y tierra en México, siglos XIX y XX*, vol. 1 (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán and El Colegio de San Luis, 2008), p. 174. On Sonora, see Francisco González de Cossío, *Historia de la tenencia y explotación del campo desde la época precortesiana hasta las leyes del 6 de Enero de 1915*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Grupo Editorial CONASUPO, 1978), p. 355; and Puebla, ‘Solicitud de terrenos para ejidos hecha por la junta municipal de Hueytlalpan’ (1875[9?]), Archivo General Agrario (AGA), exp. 23/18713 (Hueytlalpan, Zacatlán, Puebla). AGA citations include three locators (village, municipality, state).

⁷ *Conduñazgos* were private associations of share-holding landowners. Emilio Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 3 and quotation from p. 144.

immediately divide it among themselves'.⁸ Thus, by the time Francisco I. Madero became president of Mexico in 1911, Secretaría de Fomento (Ministry of Development) staff noted that the Mexico City offices were already 'flooded with demands for ejidos'.⁹

The term 'ejido' remained malleable during the armed phase of the revolution. At times, as in the writings of the influential lawyer Andrés Molina Enríquez, it was a land category, along with *fundos legales*, *propios* and *terrenos de repartimiento* (lands owned communally but divided among heads of family).¹⁰ In Zapata's *Plan de Ayala* (1911), which is generally considered the most genuinely indigenous agrarian reform programme, the term 'ejido' was also one among several colonial land categories; Zapata called for restoring to pueblos their 'ejidos, colonies, and fundos legales, or fields for sowing or labouring'.¹¹ In other instances, 'ejido' was employed as a generic term for village land rights. For example, in their continuing attempt to disentail communal lands, officials from Madero's Ministry of Development instructed surveyors to delimit 'ejido lands'.¹² In this context, 'ejido lands' encompassed all village lands, including both the *fundo legal* (which was to be 'destined exclusively for housing plots, streets, schools, markets, plazas, postal services, telegraph, etc. and the portions of land reserved for roads, cemeteries, hospitals, parks, slaughterhouses and other public uses') and other lands that were to be distributed to individual heads of families (*cabezas de familia*).¹³ Similarly, in his now famous 1912 speech to the federal Chamber of Deputies entitled 'The Reconstruction of the Ejidos of the Pueblos as a way of Suppressing the Slavery of the Mexican Day-Labourer [*Jornalero*]', Luis Cabrera blamed the 1856 disentailment laws for having 'finished off the ejidos' ('*acabado con los ejidos*'), which, in the context of his speech, meant all non-residential village lands, including water sources, woods and agricultural lands, that ideally served to complement agricultural workers' salaries.¹⁴ Cabrera was instrumental in drafting Carranza's Decree of 6 January 1915,

⁸ Robert H. Holden, *Mexico and the Survey of Public Lands: The Management of Modernization, 1876–1911* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 86.

⁹ 'Circular del 17 de febrero de 1912', in *Memoria de la Secretaría de Fomento presentada al Congreso de la Unión por el secretario del estado y del despacho del ramo, Ingeniero Alberto Robles Gil* (Mexico City: Imprenta y Fototipia de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1913).

¹⁰ Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1991 [1909]), p. 123.

¹¹ John Womack Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 400, 403.

¹² Rincón Serrano, *El ejido mexicano* (Mexico City: Centro Nacional de Investigaciones Agrarias, 1980), p. 36.

¹³ Author's translation. Secretaría de Fomento, Colonización e Industria, 'Circular Número 1' (8 Jan. 1912), in *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 16 Jan. 1912.

¹⁴ Cabrera was a member of the Madero administration who later became an influential cabinet minister under Carranza.

where the term ‘ejidos’ was in some places employed as a colonial land category (side by side with terrenos de repartimiento and lands ‘of any other category’) and in others used to denote a non-specific land concession (‘las concesiones de tierras para dotar de ejidos’).¹⁵ This latter usage eventually prevailed when, in December 1920, President Álvaro Obregón (1920–4) decreed the Ejido Law, Article 13 of which stated that ‘land granted [and restituted] to pueblos will be named ejido’ (‘la tierra dotada a los pueblos se denominará ejido’).¹⁶

Thus, the meaning of the term ‘ejido’ changed over time, as we see in the case of the village of Mulegé in the (then) Southern District of Baja California. Here, villagers took advantage of an 1869 circular from the Ministry of Development giving all pueblos in the Baja California Territory with rights to fundos legales and ejidos the opportunity to petition for land. In 1888, engineer Idelfonso Barrios of the Mulegé *ayuntamiento* (town council) measured the fundo legal and ejidos of the village, but government officials failed to formalise the land grant. Decades later, residents used Carranza’s Decree of 1915 to solicit ejido lands, and in 1924 President Álvaro Obregón ratified the nineteenth-century ejido boundaries – but whereas the original ejidos were, according to the 1869 circular, strictly meant to be used only for public services (‘sólo para servicios públicos’), the new ejido lands could be used as agricultural lands.¹⁷

Land grants and restitutions

Villagers throughout the country pragmatically employed all available laws in their petitions for land. They could do so because, politics aside, rival revolutionary agrarian programmes were similar in key ways. For example, the view that the land grant (*dotación*) was a ‘Carrancista invention’ designed to limit land reform and contrasted with more genuinely populist demands for the restitution of primordial village lands is not accurate.¹⁸ Carranza’s Decree of 1915 did offer land grants when restitutions were not tenable, but so did all the major revolutionary agrarian proclamations. Even Zapata’s Plan de Ayala

¹⁵ ‘La reconstrucción de los ejidos de los pueblos como medio de suprimir la esclavitud del jornalero mexicano’, reprinted in Jesús Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra: 1911–1913*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de Investigaciones Económicas (IMIE), 1961), p. 299.

¹⁶ Manuel Fabila, *Cinco siglos de legislación agraria en México, 1493–1949*, 2nd edition (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Históricos del Agrarismo en México, 1990), p. 299.

¹⁷ AGA, exp. 23/105 (San Ignacio, Mulegé, Territorio de Baja California); and *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 10 Mar. 2000, leg. 2.

¹⁸ Quotation from Daniel Nugent, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution: An Anthropological History of Námiquipa, Chihuahua* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 91, interpreting Nathan L. Whetten, *Rural Mexico* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 129–30.

stated that only ‘the pueblos or citizens’ with land titles ‘will immediately enter into possession of that real estate’ (Article 6); others would receive land expropriated from landowners that was distributed as grants (Article 7).¹⁹ In fact, in February 1914 Zapata instructed his military commanders ‘first to return those lands that the campesinos already had title to [the equivalent of a land restitution], and then divide up the rest in equal parts, assigning each part by lot [amounting to a land grant]’.²⁰

In practice, villagers often assumed quite pragmatic positions on the issue of restitutions versus grants. In many villages, the relative merits of these alternatives were carefully considered. For example, villagers from the Puhépecha region of La Ciénega (Michoacán) lodged 13 land petitions between 1915 and 1916 – but only after holding general assemblies to discuss whether they would have better chances of succeeding with a grant or a restitution petition. In one case, the village decided it would gain more land by seeking a grant than by seeking restitution.²¹ Sometimes villages petitioned directly for a grant, as in the case of Santa María Texcatitlán (Oaxaca) in 1913, where villagers asked the authorities to grant them a piece of land located near the town.²²

Villagers often understood the legal rationales for why restitutions were not always tenable, and they acted pragmatically on this basis. In Oaxaca, for example, villagers from Nazareno ETLA petitioned for restitution in December 1916, only to realise a month later that they lacked the necessary titles and proof of having lost their lands after the enactment of the national disentailment law of 1856 (commonly known as the Lerdo Law). As a result, they instead petitioned for a land grant.²³ In December 1916, villagers from Santa María del Tule (Oaxaca) petitioned for land restitution, but two months later they informed the governor that, if the restitution petition failed ‘for whatever reason’, they would petition for a land grant instead.²⁴ In Zacatecas, when Jorge Román, representative of the *comuneros* of Santo Tomás Venaditos, realised that he could not find the documents necessary to prove the village had won an 1848–50 lawsuit against the Griegos hacienda,

¹⁹ Womack, *Zapata*, p. 402.

²⁰ Samuel Brunk, *¡Emiliano Zapata! Revolution and Betrayal in Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), p. 149.

²¹ Arnulfo Embriz Osorio, ‘Propiedad, propietarios, pueblos indios y reforma agraria en la región puhépecha, 1915–1940’, in Antonio Escobar Ohmstede and Teresa Rojas (eds.), *Estructuras y formas agrarias en México: del pasado al presente* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), Registro Agrario Nacional (RAN) and Universidad de Quintana Roo, 2001) pp. 242–52.

²² AGA, exp. 276.1/320 (Santa María Texcatitlán, Santa María Texcatitlán, Oaxaca).

²³ AGA, exp. 2324/3311 (Nazareno ETLA, Nazareno ETLA, Oaxaca), leg. 1, f. 2.

²⁴ ‘Solicitud al Ciudadano Gobernador del Estado’ (23 Jan. 1917), AGA, exp. 23/3313 (Santa María del Tule, Santa María del Tule, Oaxaca), leg. 1, f. 113.

he immediately petitioned for a land grant instead.²⁵ And in the case of San Lorenzo Cacaotepec (Oaxaca), villagers initially petitioned for restitution, but because their land titles showed that they were already in possession of the ejido lands they claimed, they sought a land grant instead.²⁶

Restitutions were complicated for many reasons, starting with the fact that colonial grants were imprecise and often overlapped with one another – a major cause of inter-village feuds.²⁷ In Zapatista Morelos, many land petitions included requests for surveyors to mark boundaries between villages, and many of Zapata's agrarian initiatives involved approving boundary markings made by the various agrarian commissions operating in the state.²⁸ For instance, in a letter to Zapata written in May 1915, revolutionary Fortino Ayaquica commented that 'if we set about recognising what the maps or documents from viceregal times claim for each village, we would have to eliminate various modern pueblos that now exist'. In fact, after years of practical experience with land reform, Zapata's Agrarian Law of 1917 'gave the goal of a rough equity among villages clear priority' over village land rights based on primordial titles.²⁹

The legacy of the disentailment laws

A further reason why villagers employed revolutionary laws interchangeably is that between 1910 and 1920, none of these laws excluded the possibility that granted or restituted land could be parcelled individually and cultivated as privately owned lots. In the northern states, at least, this comes as no surprise. For example, when in 1913 Constitutionalist officer Lucio Blanco and his chief of staff Francisco Múgica expropriated the Los Borregos hacienda near Matamoros in order to distribute it among the peons who

²⁵ 'Reporte de la CNA' (21 Aug. 1917), AGA, exp. 232425/5818 (Santo Tomás Venaditos, Ojo Caliente, Zacatecas), leg. 5, ff. 19–20.

²⁶ Paul Garner, *La Revolución en la provincia: soberanía estatal y caudillismo serrano en Oaxaca, 1910–1920*, 2nd edition (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003), pp. 195–6.

²⁷ See, for example, Guillermo Palacios, 'Las restituciones de la Revolución', in Ismael Maldonado Salazar, Guillermo Palacios and Reyna María Silva Chacón, *Estudios campesinos en el Archivo General Agrario*, vol. 3 (Mexico City: CIESAS, RAN, Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria (SRA), Secretaría de Educación Pública–Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (SEP–CONACYT), 2001), pp. 117–58.

²⁸ In 1915, for example, the agrarian commissions of the Yautepec and Jojutla de Juárez districts drew boundary lines between the villages of Anenecuilco, Ticumán and Yautepec. See 'Acta Número 20 de la Comisión Agraria del Distrito de Yautepec', AGA, exp. 2324/2961 (Anenecuilco, Villa de Ayala, Morelos), leg. 5, f. 4. For Zapata's role, see for example 'Acta Número 2 de la Comisión Agraria del Distrito de Yautepec' (24 June 1915), AGA, exp. 2324/2961 (Anenecuilco, Villa de Ayala, Morelos), leg. 5, f. 4; and 'Acta Número 41 del Despacho de Agricultura y Colonización' (2 July 1915), leg. 1, f. 277, in the same file.

²⁹ Letter to Zapata translated by Brunk, *¡Emiliano Zapata!*, pp. 151–2. On Zapata's practical experience, see *ibid.*, p. 183. For the quote on the 1917 Agrarian Law, see *ibid.*, p. 197.

worked there, every land recipient received – just as they had during the nineteenth-century privatisation efforts – an individual property title with the inscription ‘to lands from the fractioning of ...’ (with a blank space for the name of the hacienda).³⁰

But it was not only in the north that the parcelling (*fraccionamiento en lotes*) of dotaciones was taken for granted. In Morelos, as in many other states, there was precedent ‘for uniting Liberalism with the protection of village lands’.³¹ Indeed, Zapata’s Plan de Ayala explained that ‘in order to execute the procedures regarding the properties aforementioned, the laws of disamortisation and nationalisation will be applied as they fit’.³² In fact, ‘influenced by a strong tradition of individual agricultural initiative, it was apparently Zapata’s intention from the beginning that each pueblo decide whether to work its [land] communally or to assign plots to individual farmers’.³³ What is more, Zapatista Manuel Palafox’s Ministry of Agriculture had an agrarian department (Departamento Agrario) with an office responsible for land parcelling (Sección de Fraccionamiento).³⁴

The revolution broke out at a time when villagers throughout Mexico were parcelling their communal land, often as a strategy designed to protect them against outsiders who claimed and sought to privatise the land. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, for instance, many Yucatán pueblos fractioned their ejidos into private plots for this purpose.³⁵ Many pueblos that had lost communal property to municipal authorities or local entrepreneurs also asked government officials in Mexico City to send a surveyor to conduct a new and fairer disentanglement.³⁶ In fact, for many villagers and revolutionaries alike, land reform was a continuation of disentanglement efforts, and many villagers embraced or even demanded disentanglement (rather than communal rights) as a way to claim contested land during the armed phase of the revolution. To mention only a few such examples, in early 1913 villagers from San Gerónimo Caleras (Puebla) complained to President Madero that the Liberal *reparto* had been implemented improperly and requested that it be redone.³⁷ In late 1914, villagers from Actopan (Veracruz)

³⁰ See the facsimile title in Armando de María y Campos, *Música, crónica biográfica (Aportación a la historia de la Revolución Mexicana)* (Villahermosa: Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, 1984), pp. 66–7.

³¹ Quotation in Brunk, *¡Emiliano Zapata!*, p. 67.

³² Womack, *Zapata*, p. 403.

³³ Brunk, *¡Emiliano Zapata!*, pp. 68, 149–50.

³⁴ AGA, exp. 2324/3008 (Atlatlahucan, Atlatlahucan, Morelos), leg. 2, f. 103.

³⁵ Pedro Bracamonte y Sosa, ‘La jurisdicción cuestionada y el despojo agrario en el Yucatán del siglo XIX’, *Revista Mexicana del Caribe*, 10 (2000), pp. 167–8.

³⁶ See the Chiapas cases in Gloria Pedrero Nieto, ‘La evolución del ejido en Chiapas: Siglo XIX’, in Mercedes Olivera and María Dolores Palomo (eds.), *Chiapas: de la Independencia a la Revolución* (Mexico City: CIESAS and Consejo de Ciencia y Tecnología del Estado de Chiapas, 2005), p. 365.

³⁷ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ramo Presidentes, Archivo Francisco I. Madero, vol. 64, exp. 2937.

petitioned for land that had once belonged to the ejidos of the municipality but was never properly distributed – it ‘was passed on to the present owners without one knowing whom they received the land from’.³⁸ Similarly, in 1916 two villages in the municipality of Calkiní asked the governor of Campeche for the restitution of their ejidos in accordance with the Decree of 1915, arguing that they had been excluded from an 1895 parcelling of the old ejido lands.³⁹ And in a letter written to Zapata in 1917, villagers from Tecomalco (Morelos) cited the 1857 Constitution and characterised the land they solicited as ‘vacant lands’ (*baldíos*), a land category targeted for privatisation under the Liberal disentailment laws.⁴⁰ Even as late as 1920, the San Pedro Totoltepec (Estado de México) villagers who had just received a Carrancista land grant wanted to know how much each beneficiary had to pay in order to secure individual titles for their parcels from the Ministry of Development.⁴¹ When that same year Xochimilco residents recovered part of what had been a crown land grant (the Ciénega Grande y Chica) for their collective benefit (*disfrutar en común*), they immediately divided the land into more than 2,000 individual lots, as had been customary after the implementation of the disentailment laws.⁴²

Villagers resorted to nineteenth-century disentailment laws to demand their ‘sacred individual rights’, and as part of their efforts they adopted the laws promulgated by the revolutionary faction in power in the region at the time.⁴³ The story of the San Francisco Tlanalapa pueblo (Hidalgo) is a case in point. In October 1914, 179 village men signed a petition addressed to the Ministry of Development claiming that neighbouring properties had appropriated ‘our ejidos of our native pueblo’ granted by the Spanish crown in 1716. Their petition alluded to ‘the sacred revolution’ (*la Sagrada Revolución*) and hailed the late ‘immortal caudillo Señor Don Francisco I. Madero, Constitutional President of the United States of Mexico’. Officials from the Ministry’s Agrarian Directorate responded that they would send an

³⁸ Actopan’s *solicitud* found in David Alan Skerritt, ‘Peasant Organisation in Veracruz, Mexico: 1920 to the Present’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1996, p. 42.

³⁹ AGA, exp. 2324/140 (Dzitbalché, Calkiní, Campeche), leg. 1, f. 8; and AGA, exp. 2325/118 (Bacabchén, Calkiní, Campeche), leg. 1, f. 4.

⁴⁰ AGA, exp. 2325/2998 (Tecomalco, Villa de Ayala, Morelos), leg. 1, ff. 10–15.

⁴¹ AGA, exp. 2324/2149 (San Pedro Totoltepec, Toluca, Estado de México), leg. 1, f. 22.

⁴² Juan Matamala, ‘Proceso agrario y memoria histórica, el caso de la Ciénega Grande de Xochimilco, siglos XIX y XX’, in Antonio Escobar Ohmstede, Jaqueline Gordillo, María Rosa Gudiño, Guillermo Palacios, Gabriela Acosta, Arnulfo Embriz and Juan Matamala, *Estudios campesinos en el Archivo General Agrario*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: CIESAS and RAN, 1998), pp. 215–16.

⁴³ See also J. Edgar Mendoza García, ‘La desamortización de la propiedad comunal en los pueblos chocholtecos, 1856–1900’, in Carlos Sánchez Silva (ed.), *La desamortización civil en Oaxaca* (Oaxaca: Universidad Autónoma ‘Benito Juárez’ de Oaxaca and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2007), pp. 65–100.

agrarian engineer to start surveying and distributing ejido parcels, as stipulated by the nineteenth-century disentailment laws. By the end of the year, however, the villagers had renewed their petition for the restitution of their lands under 'the Plan de Ayala's article 6 that the Sovereign Convention of Aguascalientes approved by a majority of votes'. Even as they cited Zapatista laws, however, they solicited the disentailment of their communal lands as a way of recovering their lost ejido lands in the form of private property.⁴⁴ Finally, in March 1915 the villagers sent a petition to the governor of Hidalgo in which they acknowledged 'our First Chief of the Constitutionalist Army, Señor General Don Venustiano Carranza, President of the United States of Mexico, in the Heroic City of Veracruz' and solicited land under the terms of Carranza's Decree of 1915.⁴⁵

Local Forms of Organisation

Widespread agrarian reform efforts were possible during the armed phase of the revolution because many villagers already had significant organisational experience in dealing with land matters. Despite the revolutionary fighting, villagers participated in local committees in charge of village lands, just as they had during the nineteenth century. They hired lawyers, negotiated with state officials, searched for land titles, surveyed land, marked boundaries, conducted village censuses and determined who would become land beneficiaries. In the process, they sought out government officials to formalise land reform efforts and to mediate factional struggles over land.

Village commissions

By the early twentieth century, many Mexican villagers had gained substantial experience in defending their land rights. Village representatives from throughout Mexico often travelled to Mexico City to request certified copies of their titles and maps, using the national archives (Archivo General de la Nación) to locate primordial titles and other supporting evidence regarding their communal lands; in fact, there had been so many title petitions in the mid-nineteenth century that in 1867 the national archives created a branch

⁴⁴ They asked for the 'deslinde, amojonamiento, fraccionamiento y reparto de los ejidos del pueblo'. AGA, exp. 2324/1474 (Tlanalapa, Tlanalapa, Hidalgo), leg. 8, ff. 3–4.

⁴⁵ AGA, exp. 2324/1474 (Tlanalapa, Tlanalapa, Hidalgo), leg. 8, ff. 3–4, 20, 39–40. See also the case of Acolman in José Alfredo Castellanos Suárez, *Empeño por una expectativa agraria: experiencia ejidal en el municipio de Acolman, 1915–1940* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones en México (INEHRM) and Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo, 1998).

called *Buscas* (Searches).⁴⁶ Villagers typically gave their representatives power of attorney to act on their behalf, as in the case of Francisco Macías, ‘representative of the interests of the property of the *indígenas*’ of San Miguel de Aquila (Michoacán), who in 1909 denounced the district prefect for having assigned an arbitrary sale price to their Chocohuizal lands, and Gabriel Robles, who in 1912 was the representative of Tláhuac (Federal District) in charge of negotiating with ‘the authorities in charge of matters relating to land’.⁴⁷ At other times, villagers claimed their land rights in large assemblies, as in the case of the commission from Yautepec (Morelos), made up of 60 villagers who in 1902 obtained an audience with President Porfirio Díaz (1877–80, 1884–1911), presented him with their titles and accused the Atlhuayán Hacienda owners of having seized their land.⁴⁸ These commissions could represent a single village or a number of them, as in the case of the ‘commission of *indígenas* of the Cuancamé Partido’ (Durango) that in 1911, in the name of 18,000 villagers, asked President Madero to fulfil the land reform promises made in his *Plan de San Luis Potosí*.⁴⁹

In some instances it was the municipal government (*junta municipal*) that tried to defend village lands.⁵⁰ At other times, villagers created special organisations specifically designed to protect their lands, as in the case of Amecameca (Estado de México), where in 1890 villagers formed an agricultural society (*sociedad agrícola*) to defend the interests of the pueblo against the expropriation efforts of one Don Romulado Solórzano.⁵¹ Similarly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, residents from five Durango villages ‘created formal structures apart from the ayuntamiento for the purpose of defending, recovering or acquiring lands’.⁵² In Namiquipa (Chihuahua), residents formed the Private Civil Society to ‘defend and administer’ the pueblo lands.⁵³ And in Anenecuilco (Morelos) in 1909, Emiliano Zapata (before becoming Mexico’s most famous revolutionary peasant leader) was elected president of the village council responsible for ‘defend[ing] the village’s land titles and water rights in the fields as well as in the courts’. Zapata, too, ‘first followed the familiar procedure of restudying

⁴⁶ Guillermo Palacios, ‘Las restituciones de la Revolución’, in Maldonado Salazar et al. (eds.), *Estudios campesinos*, p. 131.

⁴⁷ AGA, exp. 276.1/620 (San Miguel de Aquila, San Miguel de Aquila, Michoacán). AGA, exp. 24/923 (Tláhuac, Tláhuac, Federal District).

⁴⁸ Gildardo Magaña, *Emiliano Zapata y el agrarismo en México*, vol. 1 (Mexico City, 1934), pp. 88–90.

⁴⁹ Gildardo Magaña, *Emiliano Zapata y el agrarismo en México*, vol. 2 (Mexico City, 1937), p. 146.

⁵⁰ See the case of the junta municipal of Dzibalché that defended the pueblo’s lands against the ‘denuncias de baldíos’, in Bracamonte y Sosa, ‘La jurisdicción cuestionada’, p. 169.

⁵¹ AGA, exp. 24/11026 (Amecameca, San Pedro Nexapa, Estado de México), leg. 5, f. 23.

⁵² Patricia Eugenia Fernández de Castro Martínez, ‘Agrarian Reform from Below: The Mexican Revolution in Durango, 1910–1915’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008, pp. 607–8.

⁵³ Daniel Nugent, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution*, p. 69.

the village's land titles' and proceeded through the available legal channels.⁵⁴ In fact, that same year, 'he left for Mexico City as part of a commission sent to hire a lawyer'.⁵⁵

Villagers sent land petitions to the Ministry of Development on the eve of the revolution as they had done throughout the nineteenth century, and they continued to do so even at a time when there was no national government. For example, in her minutely researched study of Durango, Patricia Fernández de Castro found that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 'groups of residents' ranging in number 'from 12 to 403 individuals' sent 35 separate communications to the Ministry of Development.⁵⁶ Other equally detailed histories would probably find similar experiences in other states; indeed, Rafael Hernández, head of the Ministry of Development during Madero's presidency, noted that between July 1911 and June 1912 villagers from 20 states had submitted 191 petitions relating to communal land rights. In Puebla, for instance, as many as 60 villages solicited some kind of administrative procedure related to land disentanglement, grants or restitutions during this period.⁵⁷

Despite the upheaval and violence of the revolution, villagers made extensive use of legal channels to pursue their land claims. Indeed, between 1915 and 1917 alone, villagers from every state except Morelos (Zapata's principal base) sent over 1,000 land petitions to Carranza's agrarian offices in Veracruz or Mexico City. The states most actively involved included the central and southern states of Puebla, Estado de México, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Jalisco and Veracruz, but villagers from other regions, including Campeche, Coahuila, Durango, Guanajuato, Nayarit, Sinaloa and Zacatecas, also submitted considerable numbers of petitions. Later, between 1919 and 1922, Morelos villagers would file 141 formal land petitions as well.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Womack, *Zapata*, pp. 3–5, 62, 64.

⁵⁵ Brunk, *¡Emiliano Zapata!*, p. 25.

⁵⁶ Fernández de Castro, 'Agrarian Reform from Below', pp. 607–8.

⁵⁷ Other states (and numbers of petitions) were: Baja California (2), Chiapas (6), Coahuila (1), Durango (2), Federal District (6), Guanajuato (6), Hidalgo (3), Jalisco (8), Estado de México (49), Michoacán (25), Morelos (1), Nayarit (2), Oaxaca (3), Puebla (60), Querétaro (3), San Luis Potosí (6), Sinaloa (2), Tlaxcala (1), Veracruz (3) and Zacatecas (2). See Rafael L. Hernández, *Política agraria (julio de 1911 a junio de 1912)*, reprinted in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 2, pp. 113–15.

⁵⁸ See *Memoria del Departamento Agrario*, Apéndice estadístico 1936/1937, México, reprinted in Hans Werner Tobler, 'Peasants and the Shaping of the Revolutionary State, 1910–1940', in Friedrich Katz (ed.), *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 500–1; and archival evidence of four presidential land resolutions for Quintana Roo from 1917.

Formalising committees for land distribution

Prior to the revolution, villagers not only established local organisations to negotiate their land rights with state officials; they also formed committees responsible for the technical procedures of land reform, including marking boundaries and conducting censuses. In fact, in the literature on the nineteenth century, one finds frequent references to villagers creating special committees to handle the technical requirements of land privatisation. In Papantla (Veracruz) in 1875, for example, ‘the Ayuntamiento proceeded to form a disentailment commission, which included three prominent Totonac representatives’.⁵⁹ References to a distribution commission (*comisión repartidora*) appear in both village petitions and state laws from Jalisco.⁶⁰ Similarly, in nineteenth-century Michoacán, ‘District prefects throughout the state were instructed to convene meetings in all communities ... [and] hold elections for the local privatisation commissions’. The members of these commissions ‘were to compile a local census, survey and map out all communal lands, and divide them into parcels of equal value for distribution under private title’.⁶¹ In Pajacuarán (Michoacán) in 1879, parcels were called *partijas*, and commissions were responsible for compiling a census of *comuneros accionistas*.⁶² And in Ciudad Altamirano (Guerrero) in 1888, individuals received titles to land issued by the Comisión Repartidora de los Terrenos de Indígenas (Indigenous Lands Distribution Commission).⁶³

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that during the armed phase of the revolution as well, all the revolutionary factions fostered local or regional forms of organisation to implement their land reform programmes. Indeed, between 1914 and 1915, all the main factions created variants of such organisations. In Morelos, provisional governor General Lorenzo Vázquez ordered municipal presidents of the Zapatista south to appoint ‘keepers of the land’ (‘guarda-tierras’) responsible for the provisional land distribution that

⁵⁹ Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided*, p. 139.

⁶⁰ Decreto Núm. 121 del Congreso del Estado de Jalisco (17 April 1849), in Loreto, *Colección de acuerdos*, pp. 152–58, and Knowlton, ‘La individualización de la propiedad corporativa civil en el siglo XIX – Notas sobre Jalisco’, *Historia Mexicana*, 18: 1 (1978), pp. 45–57.

⁶¹ Jennie Purnell, *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico: The Agraristas and Cisteros of Michoacán* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 35. See also Robert Knowlton, ‘La división de las tierras de los pueblos durante el siglo XIX: el caso de Michoacán’, *Historia Mexicana*, 40: 1 (1990), pp. 8–10.

⁶² Brigitte Boehm de Lameiras, ‘Las comunidades de indígenas de Ixtlán y Pajacuarán ante la reforma liberal en el siglo XIX’, in Carlos Paredes Martínez and Marta Terán (eds.), *Autoridad y gobierno indígena en Michoacán*, vol. 2 (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, CIESAS, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, 2003), p. 422.

⁶³ ‘Títulos de adjudicación de terrenos expedidos por la Comisión Repartidora de Terrenos de Indígenas’ (1888), AGA, exp. 23/1319 (Ciudad Altamirano, Pungarabato, Guerrero).

the revolutionary agrarian commissions would later confirm.⁶⁴ In Tlaxcala, Domingo Arenas distributed dozens of military land grants to local agrarian boards (*juntas agrarias locales*), which were to present their land titles to the Conventionist government in order to have their grants or restitutions confirmed.⁶⁵ In Guanajuato, where villagers had taken over a number of haciendas, officials instructed them to form a neighbourhood board (*junta de vecinos*) ‘to study how to resolve the agrarian problem’.⁶⁶ In Veracruz, it was often the civil administration boards (*juntas de administración civil*, created by Governor Cándido Aguilar in late 1914 as substitutes for the municipal governments and *jefaturas políticas* that had collapsed) that petitioned for land and administered land reform.⁶⁷

Carranza’s Decree of 1915 created a Comisión Local Agraria (Local Agrarian Commission, CLA) at the state level and executive committees (Comités Particulares Ejecutivos, CPEs) in every district, *partido*, canton or department (the various within-state administrative divisions). Secondary sources indicate that by 1917 a total of 24 CLAs had been established in Aguascalientes, Chiapas, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Colima, Distrito Federal, Durango, Estado de México, Guerrero, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Michoacán, Morelos, Puebla, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tabasco, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Yucatán and Zacatecas.

Villagers also began to adopt Carrancista administrative and legal terminology. In Tlanalapa (Hidalgo), for example, the military commander and provisional municipal president told village residents to form a *junta* in order to petition for the implementation of nineteenth-century Liberal laws (‘el deslinde y el reparto de Egidos [sic]’). This junta, charged with studying the ‘ejido questions’ regarding land disentanglement, was first named the Junta Local Agraria (Local Agrarian Board) and then, following Carranza’s Decree, the Comité Ejecutivo (Executive Committee), responsible for conducting a village census.⁶⁸ A similar pattern is evident even in Zapatista Morelos: between January 1920 and January 1922, at least nine Morelos villages – including Zapata’s home town of Anenecuilco – formally

⁶⁴ Marte R. Gómez, *La reforma agraria en las filas villistas, años 1913 a 1915 y 1920* (Mexico City: INEHRM, 1966), p. 97.

⁶⁵ Raymond Buve, *El movimiento revolucionario en Tlaxcala* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana and Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala, 1994), p. 157.

⁶⁶ Gómez, *La reforma agraria en las filas villistas*, p. 91.

⁶⁷ See, for example, ‘Solicitud de restitución’ (12 Nov. 1914), ACAM–Veracruz, exp. 36, Chiltoyac; ‘Del Presidente de la JAC al General de Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz’ (8 April 1915), AGA, exp. 23/5101 (Acula, Acula, Veracruz); Ricardo Corzo Ramírez, José González Sierra and David A. Skerritt, ... *Nunca un desleal: Cándido Aguilar, 1889–1960* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México and Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1986), p. 88; and Skerritt, ‘Peasant Organisation in Veracruz’, p. 42.

⁶⁸ AGA, exp. 2324/1474 (Tlanalapa, Tlanalapa, Hidalgo), leg. 8, ff. 3–4, 20, 39–40, 53–58 and leg. 9, ff. 2, 8.

petitioned the governor for land and consecutively held elections for CPE representatives, many citing Carranza's Decree of 1915.⁶⁹

In the majority of instances, CPEs were comprised of three people representing villagers soliciting land. Their members were popularly elected to one-year terms, although popular elections at the time 'often amounted to asking village residents to raise their hand if they supported the new leaders'.⁷⁰ They were municipality-wide organisations, and just as Mexico's municipalities differ greatly, so CPEs varied significantly in their size and jurisdiction. Their relationships to the municipal authorities or to the politico-religious *cabildos* also contrasted greatly.

CPEs assumed principal responsibility for key land reform measures, often taking the place of state officials. In fact, because state offices usually lacked sufficient personnel to implement land reform, CPEs were involved in surveying the territory, marking boundaries, measuring the land surface in question and then distributing land parcels to petitioners.⁷¹ In 1917, for example, Veracruz officials advised the CPE in Rinconada that, until a surveyor (*ingeniero agrónomo*) became available, its members should go about gathering the preliminary information required, including a village census, the classification of the land solicited (including details regarding available water sources, ownership and the estimated value of the properties), the size of a land parcel sufficient for family subsistence in the area, the pasture lands required by the village, and the village's history and present-day economic conditions (including average daily wages and local prices).⁷² Similarly, members of the CPE in San Pedro Totoltepec (Estado de México), accompanied by troops dispatched by the state's chief of military operations, visited a number of villages in order to 'mark boundaries, identify and measure lands and distribute them', as instructed by amendments to the Decree of 1915.⁷³ And, in San Juan Quetzalcoapan (Tlaxcala), villagers

⁶⁹ AGA, exp. 23/2980 (Tetelcingo, Cuautla); exp. 2324/2961 (Anenecuilco, Villa de Ayala); exp. 2324/3008 (Atlatahucan, Atlatahucan); exp. 2325/2967 (Santa Inés, Cuautla); exp. 2325/2998 (Tecomalco, Villa de Ayala); exp. 2325/3043 (Jaloxtoc, Villa de Ayala); exp. 2325/3052 (San Miguel Huajintlán, Amacuzac); exp. 23/3057 (Yautepec, Yautepec) and exp. 2325/3073 (Quebrantadero, Axochiapan). For Obregón's relationship with the Zapatistas, see Linda Hall, 'Alvaro Obregón and the Politics of Mexican Land Reform, 1920–1924', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 60: 2 (1980), pp. 213–38.

⁷⁰ Douglas W. Richmond, 'Factional Political Strife in Coahuila, 1910–1920', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 60: 1 (1980), p. 61.

⁷¹ See, for example, Articles 3, 7 and 8 of the Decree of 6 Jan. 1915 and Pastor Rouaix's decree as Minister of Development in *Gaceta Oficial del Estado de Veracruz*, 1 Apr. 1915, pp. 4–5. ⁷² ACAM–Veracruz, exp. 19A, f. 9 (Rinconada, Emiliano Zapata).

⁷³ AGA, exp. 2324/2149 (San Pedro Totoltepec, Toluca, Estado de México), leg. 7, ff. 51, 60, 70.

included in their 1917 land petition to the governor an agricultural census and a survey ('vista de ojos') of village lands.⁷⁴

CPEs throughout Mexico became intimately involved with highly technical aspects of land reform. In 1917, for instance, Veracruz's interim secretary of the Ministry of Development instructed the CPE in Jalcomulco to conduct a census of landless residents ('un padrón de los vecinos que carezcan de tierras para cultivar').⁷⁵ Two years later, the committee received precise instructions regarding how to measure the provisional land grant until the surveyor from the local agrarian reform commission could visit the village. As in colonial times, the perimeter of the land grant was to be measured 'from the temple in the direction of the four winds', and, as with the implementation of nineteenth-century disentailment laws, once the new boundaries were marked, CPE members were to divide the land into individual (family) parcels.⁷⁶

The CPEs permitted extensive participation by villagers in the land reform process. For instance, in 1916 over a dozen Purhépecha barrios formed CPEs to manage the administrative formalities (*trámites*) involved in the restitution of their lands.⁷⁷ Many CPEs went further and took the reform process into their own hands. The residents of Santiago Tlajomulco (Hidalgo), who had petitioned for land in December 1915, are a case in point. In January 1916, the CLA instructed villagers to list 'six honourable residents' who might form the CPE, and in April 1916 they elected a committee president, two associate members (*vocales*) and a secretary. However, impatient with bureaucratic delays, in August of that same year the Comité Particular Local went ahead with the distribution (*repartición*) of small fractions of neighbouring hacienda lands.⁷⁸ CPEs even went so far as to issue their own rulings on lands. This was the case with CPEs in the state of Veracruz, which prompted Governor Aguilar to send telegrams to all municipal presidents warning local and civil authorities (including CPEs) to abstain from 'invading state-level jurisdiction'.⁷⁹ Many other CPE's were reined in by Carrancista officials. In 1918, for example, Ministry of

⁷⁴ AGA, exp. 23/5004 (San Juan Quetzalcoapan, Tzopantepec, Tlaxcala).

⁷⁵ 'Del Secretario General Interino' (23 Mar. 1915), ACAM-Veracruz, exp. 22 (Jalcomulco, Jalcomulco).

⁷⁶ 'Instrucciones de la CLA' (1917), ACAM-Veracruz, exp. 22, f. 14 (Jalcomulco, Jalcomulco).

⁷⁷ Arnulfo Embriz and Gabriela Acosta, 'El proceso de reconocimiento de los bienes comunales de San Francisco Uruapan y sus barrios, 1941-1989', in María Rosa Gudiño et al., *Estudios campesinos en el Archivo General Agrario*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: CIESAS and RAN, 1999). Gabriela Acosta Espino and Arnulfo Embriz Osorio, 'Territorios indios en la región purhépecha, 1915-1940', in Escobar Ohmstede et al. (eds.), *Estudios campesinos*, pp. 147-8.

⁷⁸ AGA, exp. 2325/1476 (Santiago Tlajomulco, Toluca, Hidalgo), leg. 1, ff. 7, 8, 27.

⁷⁹ *Gaceta Oficial del Estado de Veracruz*, 23 Nov. 1916, p. 2.

Agriculture officials asked the governor of Aguascalientes to disband the CPE in the town of Cosío on the grounds that ‘the CPE created too many difficulties in the implementing of the land grant, and went as far as to disobey orders’.⁸⁰

Those in charge of land distribution had ample opportunities for graft – a reality aptly captured in the words of villagers from San Gerónimo Caleras (Puebla), who in their January 1913 letter to President Madero complained about the municipal president’s corruption and nepotism by citing the popular saying ‘he/she who divides and distributes keeps the best part’ (‘el que parte y reparte se queda con la mejor parte’).⁸¹ Furthermore, CPEs often represented only one faction within a village. In 1918 the village of Tlanalapa (Hidalgo) was divided between those who ‘accepted without discussion the work of the CPE’ and ‘a second group that demanded accountability from the CPE’.⁸² In the village of Atlatlahucan (Morelos) in 1921, ‘the struggle [was] one between political bosses’ (‘la lucha se desarrolla entre los dos caciques del pueblo’). In fact, one of the town’s leaders was elected ‘representative of the agrarian question’, while the other was elected president of the agrarian committee.⁸³

Even before the end of the armed phase of the revolution, there were so many CPEs actively engaged in the different technical aspects of land distribution, and so many of them were involved in local struggles over land, that many of President Carranza’s first national decrees on land issues addressed the challenge of how to set limits on, and rein in the actions of, CPE members.⁸⁴ In turn, local committee members lobbied federal government officials to validate their land reforms and to legitimate their (often contested) mandate.

Nationalising Local Land Reform Efforts

Alan Knight has argued that the main ‘task for Carranza, or any would-be national authority, was the integration, by force or cajolery, of ... scattered leaders and movements into a sound, legitimate, national regime’.⁸⁵ This was

⁸⁰ ‘Del Subsecretario de Agricultura y Fomento’ (26 June 1918), AGA, exp. 2425/1 (Cosío, Cosío, Aguascalientes), leg. 1, f. 56.

⁸¹ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Archivo Francisco I. Madero, vol. 64, exp. 2937, ff. 1–30.

⁸² AGA, exp. 2324/1474, (Tlanalapa, Tlanalapa, Hidalgo), leg. 9, f. 8.

⁸³ ‘Oficio número 225 del Ing. Emilio Gómez’, AGA, exp. 232425/3008 (Atlatlahucan, Atlatlahucan, Morelos), leg. 1, f. 158.

⁸⁴ See, for example, ‘Acuerdo Número 1 del Primer Jefe del Ejército Constitucionalista’, 19 Jan. 1916, reproduced in Jesús Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra, 1915–1917*, vol. 4 (Mexico City: IMIE, 1962), pp. 251–3.

⁸⁵ Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 2: *Counter-revolution and Reconstruction* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 251.

certainly the challenge that the Carrancistas faced with regard to the multiple land reform experiments mushrooming in different parts of the country, and they devoted considerable political energy to constructing what was in effect the first non-military national administration emerging from the revolution. In the process of regulating villagers' participation in land reform, this national administration – under the jurisdiction of the federal executive – claimed legislative authority, invaded the sphere of the judiciary and greatly restricted the role of municipal and state governments, all elements that would characterise Mexico's agrarian reform for the next 70 years.

National offices for land reform

That Carrancistas created special offices to manage local participation in land reform was not unusual. Whether the goal was to privatise or to redistribute, land reform required administrative offices. On the eve of the revolution, Porfirio Díaz (who had been in the process of centralising what had largely been the state-level implementation of disentailment laws) created within the Ministry of Development in Mexico City an agrarian office (Dirección General Agraria) comprised of commissions for fieldwork, office work and archival work.⁸⁶ In 1910, revolutionaries seeking to overthrow Díaz also saw the need for a national organisation to manage the countryside, and Liberal Party members Juan Saravia and Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama proposed the creation of an 'agrarian commission'.⁸⁷ Subsequently, President Madero's minister of development, Rafael Hernández, established an 'executive agrarian commission' with directorates (*direcciones agrarias*) in Michoacán, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí and Baja California.⁸⁸

Revolutionaries also created (at least on paper) administrative offices responsible for agrarian issues. In 1912, for example, Nicanor Serrano and Juan Vázquez Ramírez formed an agrarian committee in Zacatelco, Tlaxcala. In 1913, Saturnino Cedillo and brothers Francisco and Alberto Carrera Torres created a First Agrarian Junta. And in 1914, Pancho Villa created an agrarian commission in Chihuahua in charge of drafting an agrarian reform law; Eugenio Aguirre Benavides formed a Laguna-area Agricultural Commission in Torreón; Pánfilo Natera established the Department of Agriculture of the Central Division in Zacatecas; Military Chief Héctor F. López created an

⁸⁶ María Cecilia Zuleta, 'La Secretaría de Fomento y el fomento agrícola en México, 1876–1910: la invención de una agricultura próspera que no fue', *Mundo Agrario*, 1: 1 (2000), n.p. ⁸⁷ Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 2, p. 221.

⁸⁸ Marte R. Gómez, *Historia de la Comisión Nacional Agraria* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería, 1975), pp. 33–4; Heriberto Moreno García, 'Que haya tierra para todos', in Enrique Florescano (ed.), *Historia general de Michoacán: el siglo XX*, vol. 4 (Morelia: Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, 1989), p. 160.

Intervention Office in charge of restituting village lands in Guerrero; and General Pablo González set up a Committee for Confiscated Property in Puebla.⁸⁹

Even the Zapatistas, who in 1914 created ‘agrarian commissions of locally respected farmers’ in Morelos, required a more hierarchical administrative structure. Indeed, the work of these agrarian commissions ‘would remain provisional until a new Zapatista government took office in the state’.⁹⁰ Their procedures required oversight from Zapatista headquarters (Cuartel General), which was in charge of verifying titles, survey work and censuses, and final approval came from ‘the Supreme Government that emanates from the triumphant revolution’.⁹¹ In fact, when Zapatista Manuel Palafox became minister of agriculture during the Aguascalientes Convention (November 1914 to January 1915), he ‘gave the secretary of agriculture immense authority over rural and urban property and natural resources ... [T]he Department of Agriculture would be the central agency of a stupendous nationalizing reformation of Mexico’.⁹²

Villagers themselves requested the creation of state offices in order to legitimate land reform decisions. In early 1915 in Texcoco (Estado de México), for example, a ‘commission of indígenas’ met with General Palafox to explain that the Zapatista forces had returned the villages’ ejidos and water sources, stating that they simply wanted to legitimate this compensatory action (‘lo único que deseamos es que ese acto posesorio se nos confirme legalmente’).⁹³ In Namiquipa, villagers ‘no longer perceived Villismo as a viable avenue through which to press agrarian demands’ in part because Villismo ‘lack[ed] a supra-local institutional framework through which to validate agrarian claims’.⁹⁴ In Santiago Tlajomulco (Hidalgo) in 1916, villagers

⁸⁹ Buve, *El movimiento revolucionario en Tlaxcala*, p. 145; Dudley Ankersen, *Agrarian Warlord: Saturnino Cedillo and the Mexican Revolution in San Luis Potosí* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 63; Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 410; María Vargas-Lobsinger, *La Comarca Lagunera: de la revolución a la expropiación de las haciendas, 1910–1940* (Mexico City, 1999), p. 35; Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, p. 187; Berta Ulloa, ‘La lucha armada (1911–1920)’, in Daniel Cosío Villegas (ed.), *Historia General de México*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1987), p. 1147; David G. LaFrance, *Revolution in Mexico’s Heartland: Politics, War, and State-building in Puebla, 1913–1920* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 2003), p. 125.

⁹⁰ Womack, *Zapata*, p. 212.

⁹¹ ‘Instrucciones para establecer la repartición de terrenos pertenecientes a los enemigos de la revolución; Campamento Revolucionario en Morelos’ (11 Feb. 1914), AGN, Fondo Govevea de la O, caja 19, exp. 7, f. 111, and www.bibliotecas.tv/zapata/1914/211feb14.htm.

⁹² Womack, *Zapata*, p. 246.

⁹³ Gómez, *La reforma agraria*, p. 92.

⁹⁴ Daniel Nugent and Ana María Alonso, ‘Multiple Selective Traditions in Agrarian Reform and Agrarian Struggle: Popular Culture and State Formation in the Ejido of Namiquipa, Chihuahua’, in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 221.

insistently requested that agrarian officials in the state formalise land measurements ('pidiendo que se nos diera la constancia de que se ponía al pueblo en posesión del egido [sic]').⁹⁵ And villagers in Morelos blamed Carranza's attacks on their state for the lack of a formal office ('un despacho definitivo') after 1917.⁹⁶

President Carranza was, then, travelling a well-established path when he named Minister of Development Pastor Rouaix (in Veracruz, at the time) as national agrarian administrator for the 1914–15 period, or when the national commission entrusted with dealing with agrarian reform matters – the Comisión Nacional Agraria (National Agrarian Commission, CNA) – opened its offices in the Minería Building on Tacuba Street (Mexico City) in March 1916. What was novel was the way in which local demands for land facilitated the Carrancistas' efforts to establish executive control over spheres of activity conventionally ascribed to other branches of government.

Taking on legislative functions

There were so many queries about land reform procedures that the CNA made itself relevant by legislating on questions originating at the village level. Of course, these matters were not exclusively local; the federal agrarian administration issued rulings regarding the nature and distribution of property that were of major national importance. Circular 1, for example, responded to a query from Zacatecas concerning the physical extent of land grants and restitutions.⁹⁷ Circular 3 addressed villagers' questions regarding the meaning of Article 2 of the Decree of 1915, which stated that lands granted or restituted should be temporarily held in common. Villagers wanted to know whether this provision applied only to the newly acquired lands, or whether it affected all other village lands as well.⁹⁸

The actions of the new national agrarian administration also affected the balance of power within federal Mexico. For instance, on 3 October 1916 the CNA issued a ruling in response to a query from Campeche's CLA concerning the vagueness of the concept of the ejido. The Campeche officials wanted to know whether ejido extensions should follow the Departmental Law of Yucatán of 1884 (which specified that an ejido measured 1,756

⁹⁵ When they heard nothing back from the Hidalgo offices, they took the land reform into their own hands ('el vecindario tomó posesión de hecho') and distributed land in small parcels. AGA, exp. 2325/1476 (Santiago Tlajomulco, Tolcayuca, Hidalgo), leg. 1, f. 27.

⁹⁶ AGA, exp. 2325/2998 (Tecomalco, Villa de Ayala, Morelos), leg. 1, ff. 10–15.

⁹⁷ 'Circular Número 1' (25 Jan. 1916), in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 4, pp. 254–6.

⁹⁸ 'Circular Número 3' (6 May 1916), in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 4, pp. 257–8.

hectares from ‘the dome of the church in each direction of the winds’) or limits set by the federal Decree of 1915. The latter prevailed.⁹⁹

What greatly empowered the agrarian administration was that at the Constitutional Convention in 1916–17, the more radical Carrancista delegates had incorporated the Decree of 6 January 1915 into Article 27 of the new (1917) federal Constitution, thereby transforming the decree of one revolutionary faction into national law.¹⁰⁰ It is illustrative in this regard that T. M. James shows, in his detailed study of the Supreme Court’s role during the early years of the revolution, that judges decided on whether to grant landowners court protection (*amparo*) based on the fact that the Decree of 1915 ‘now formed an integral part of constitutional article 27’.¹⁰¹

The agrarian administration’s legislative activity was extensive. Between March 1916 and January 1917 the CNA held 55 sessions to examine over 4,400 local queries regarding the implementation of the Decree of 1915, and issued 16 circulars in response. By 1919 it had issued 38 such circulars, which contained rules and regulations that went well beyond the administrative aspects of land reform to address key issues of property rights. One of Álvaro Obregón’s first presidential actions was to issue the Law of Ejidos on 28 December 1920, which codified all agrarian circulars issued up to that date and became the first agrarian regulatory legislation – legislation that in substance emanated not from the federal Congress but from the CNA’s circulars.¹⁰² Moreover, when Obregón then cancelled the Law of Ejidos in November 1921 (the law suffered from many internal contradictions), he explicitly claimed for the executive branch the power to regulate agrarian matters (‘reorganizar y reglamentar en materia agraria’).¹⁰³

Parallel court systems

The CNA also functioned as a court operating in parallel with, but separate from, the country’s regular judicial system. The CNA’s role differed from that of judicial authorities during the implementation of the Liberal disentailment laws, when district judges (*jueces de distrito*) legitimated village censuses, gave out private land titles and participated in many other land privatisation and

⁹⁹ Gómez, *Historia de la Comisión Nacional Agraria*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁰ The original 1917 Article 27 is reproduced in Raúl Lemus García, *Derecho agrario mexicano* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1991), pp. 280–5.

¹⁰¹ T. M. James, ‘Law and Revolution in Mexico: A Constitutional History of Mexico’s Amparo Court and Revolutionary Social Reform, 1861–1934’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2006, p. 155.

¹⁰² Reprinted in Fabila, *Cinco siglos*, pp. 296–308. Marte Gómez characterises it as ‘el trabajo de carácter legislativo en el que se empeñó la Comisión Nacional Agraria’ (*Historia de la Comisión Nacional Agraria*, p. 100).

¹⁰³ Fabila, *Cinco siglos*, pp. 309–10.

distribution procedures.¹⁰⁴ The Supreme Court, in turn, ruled on matters regarding land rights and sometimes even ruled in favour of pueblos.¹⁰⁵ In Oaxaca in 1882, for example, villagers from the Suchixtlahuaca pueblo asked the district judge to register their colonial titles in the public property registry. Privatising communal lands afforded some villages the opportunity to file suits to recover lands lost to haciendas, neighbouring caciques or other pueblos.¹⁰⁶

In the early revolutionary period, Zapata's agrarian utopia formally granted the judiciary a prominent role in land reform. The Plan de Ayala stated that the landowners or 'usurpers' who felt they had rights to their expropriated lands 'will deduce it before the special tribunals which will be established on the triumph of the revolution'.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the 1915 Agrarian Law promoted a strong judiciary. In practice, though, the Zapatistas spent less time dealing with disgruntled landowners than they did managing inter-village feuds and personal vendettas over land, 'and so there was a process of appeal to various judicial authorities, to Zapatista headquarters, or to Zapata himself'.¹⁰⁸ What is noteworthy is that these appeals relied heavily on the movement's fledgling agrarian administration, rather than on the judiciary. In 1914, for example, Zapata sent directives to all agrarian commissions in Morelos specifying that land disputes between villages or individuals were to be arbitrated by the state's Ministry of Agriculture.¹⁰⁹ And when in August 1915 two villages fought over the restitution of lands in Chapultepec (Estado de México), Zapata – calling himself 'this high authority' ('esta superioridad') – ordered residents to obey the decision of the land

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, AGA, exp. 23/10918 (Santa María Jajalpa, Tenengo del Valle, Estado de México); AGA, exp. 276.1/1324 (San Mateo Cuatatlán, Tlanochinol, Hidalgo); AGA, exp. 23/1237 (San Miguel Tecomatlán, Tlalchapa, Guerrero); AGA, exp. 23/140 (Villa Dzitbalché, Calkiní, Campeche); and ACAM–Veracruz, exp. 32 (Santa María Tatetla, Jalcomulco). See also Robert J. Knowlton, 'Tribunales federales y terrenos rurales en el México del siglo XIX: el *Semanario Judicial de la Federación*', *Historia Mexicana*, 46: 1 (1996), pp. 71–98; Daniela Marino, 'La modernidad a juicio: pleitos por la tierra y la identidad comunal en el estado de México (Municipalidad de Huixquilucan, 1856–1900)', in Romana Falcón (ed.), *Culturas de pobreza y resistencia: estudios de marginados, proscritos y descontentos – México, 1804–1910* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2005), pp. 237–64; and Inocencio Noyola, 'Los juicios de apeos y deslindes en San Luis Potosí', in Escobar Ohmstede et al., *Agua y tierra en México*, pp. 331–57.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, 'Sentencias del Supremo Tribunal de Justicia de la Nación', AGA, exp. 24/2425 (Tixmadeje, Acambay, Estado de México), leg. 5; and Lucio Cabrera Acevedo, *La Suprema Corte de Justicia en La República Restaurada, 1867–1876* (Mexico City: Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, 1989), pp. 185–93.

¹⁰⁶ Mendoza García, 'La desamortización', pp. 79–80.

¹⁰⁷ Plan de Ayala, translation by Womack, *Zapata*, p. 402.

¹⁰⁸ Brunk, *¡Emiliano Zapata!*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁹ 'A las comisiones agrarias del Estado de Morelos' (10 Sep. 1914), reproduced in Isidro Fabela, *Documentos históricos de la Revolución Mexicana: Emiliano Zapata – El Plan de Ayala y su Política Agraria* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1970), pp. 118–21.

commission (*comisión de campo*) established under the jurisdiction of the Zapatista Ministry of Agriculture.¹¹⁰ Rural dwellers themselves expected administrative officers to assume the role formerly reserved for judges. In 1920, for instance, residents of Atlatlahucan (Morelos) asked the Local Agrarian Commission to ‘walk the boundaries of the ejidos of this pueblo and in that way discover exactly what has been usurped by landowners and neighbouring pueblos’.¹¹¹

Supreme Court judges did play an important role supporting land reform efforts, as did many other Carrancista urban professionals (lawyers and engineers, in particular) at the time. First, as James explains, ‘from 1917 onwards, the Court established that in all suits filed against the agrarian reform the immediate suspension of the act was *not* to be granted by the district judge, a matter of course in most other administrative cases’. Then, when land owners sought Supreme Court protection in the form of amparo suits against presidential land grants, ‘the Court rarely granted amparo against the early agrarian reform’. In fact, until 1922, ‘the Supreme Court actively encouraged the administrative branch of government to do what it felt was necessary to alter the land tenure arrangements of rural Mexico’.¹¹² And that was precisely what agrarian reform administrators did.

CNA officials assumed the *de facto* role of judges when they interpreted the ‘text and spirit’ of the Decree of 1915, as exemplified in the many judgments found in the agrarian archives in which federal administrators ruled on local matters.¹¹³ For example, when villagers from San Pedro Tlacotepec (Tlaxcala) complained that the CLA was unjustly granting their lands to the villagers of neighbouring San Cosme Xalostoc, the CNA issued a verdict on the matter during its October 1916 session.¹¹⁴ Here again, villagers actively sought rulings from the agrarian administration in matters otherwise reserved for local judges. When villagers from Nazareno Etna (Oaxaca) who had received a land grant in 1917 asked the CNA to judge whether particular land extensions were now theirs or still belonged to hacienda owners, they agreed to be bound by the CNA’s resolution.¹¹⁵ And when comuneros from Santo Tomás Vendaditos (Zacatecas) fought with neighbouring hacienda owners, the villagers took their case directly to the CNA, in order that

¹¹⁰ Eduardo Aguado López, *Una mirada al reparto agrario en el Estado de México, 1915–1992: de la dotación y restitución a la privatización de la propiedad social* (Toluca: Colegio Mexiquense, 1998), p. 62. ¹¹¹ AGA, exp. 2324/3008 (Atlatlahucan, Atlatlahucan, Morelos), leg. 1, f. 3.

¹¹² James, ‘Law and Revolution in Mexico’, pp. 157, 159, 160, 161. This changed after 1923, when the Court increasingly granted amparo protection to land owners, effectively blocking land reform efforts in many parts of the country.

¹¹³ ‘Circular Número 1’ (25 Jan. 1916), reprinted in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 4, pp. 254–6. ¹¹⁴ Gómez, *Historia de la Comisión Nacional Agraria*, p. 101.

¹¹⁵ AGA, exp. 2324/3311 (Nazareno Etna, Nazareno Etna, Oaxaca), leg. 5, ff. 3, 5, 8 and leg. 2, f. 40.

‘certain justice would be done’ (‘seguros de que se nos hará justicia’).¹¹⁶ Whether or not justice was in fact done, the executive-controlled agrarian administration certainly acted as a proxy agrarian court, as it would continue to do for the better part of the twentieth century.¹¹⁷

The limits to Mexican federalism

Although Zapata never gave up on the idea of a decentralised governmental system in which municipalities had greater autonomy, and Article 115 of the 1917 Constitution hailed the autonomy of municipalities, the Carrancista approach to agrarian matters limited sharply the role that municipal governments could play in land reform. One way this was achieved was by creating parallel forms of local administration. Whereas Luis Cabrera had initially suggested that so long as pueblos lacked the legal standing required to administer communal property, lands returned to them would belong to the nation and would be administered by the respective municipal governments, Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution gave land beneficiaries the legal standing to own and administer granted and restituted land collectively.¹¹⁸ In practice, this meant that once the CPE had concluded its tasks representing land solicitors and helping implement the land grant or restitution, villagers had to elect *comités particulares administrativos* (administrative committees, CPAs) that were in charge of local organisational matters. For example, in their August 1917 response to a petition by villagers from Nazareno Etlá (Oaxaca), officials of Oaxaca’s CLA gave villagers a copy of CNA Circular 22 explaining the procedures to be followed in organising elections to select a CPA.¹¹⁹ Circular 22, dated April 1917, was a CNA ruling that responded to queries about who should administer land once it was granted or restituted. CPAs were popularly elected and responsible for providing services to residents.¹²⁰ By the 1920s, most recipients of ejido grants or restitutions in all Mexican states and territories (including Morelos) had elected local administrative committees that represented beneficiaries as a collectivity

¹¹⁶ ‘Reporte de la CNA’ (21 Aug. 1917), AGA, exp. 232425/5818 (Santo Tomás Venaditos, Ojo Caliente, Zacatecas), leg. 5, ff. 19–20.

¹¹⁷ Martha Chávez Padrón, *El proceso social agrario y sus procedimientos* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1983), p. 33.

¹¹⁸ For Cabrera, see *Discurso de Iniciativa de Ley del 3 de diciembre de 1912*, by Lic. Luis Cabrera, reprinted in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 2, pp. 277–310. Many studies of popular resistance to agrarian reform explain this resistance on the basis of the erroneous assumption that ejido lands were national lands.

¹¹⁹ AGA, exp. 2324/3311 (Nazareno Etlá, Nazareno Etlá, Oaxaca), leg. 1, ff. 2, 9–24, 40.

¹²⁰ ‘Circular Número 22’, reproduced in Manuel Fabila, *Cinco siglos*, pp. 272–3.

vis-à-vis state and national governments, clearly sidestepping municipal governments in the process.¹²¹

This was just one of the ways in which the Carrancistas reined in the role of municipal governments, however. Their role could, for instance, be limited at the time the land ruling was issued, which is what happened in the early Coahuila resolutions. In Villista Coahuila in 1915, ‘groups of peasants asked for uncultivated land’, but land was not actually distributed until 1917, when Carrancista Governor Gustavo Espinosa Mireles ‘formulated a bill enabling the municipal presidents to divide unused land among their constituents on a provisional basis’.¹²² The CNA accepted some of these provisional land endowments, but it rejected many others.¹²³ In the case of Villa Acuña, for example, the CNA ordered villagers to return the land they had received because the restitution was carried out improperly. The ayuntamiento had solicited the land in question, but CNA Circular 19 clearly stated that municipal governments had no legal authority to do so; only residents themselves (‘el vecindario de los pueblos’) could petition for land.¹²⁴

Many of the CNA’s early circulars, and a large part of its administrative work, addressed the relationship between federal authorities and state governments. Starting in January 1915, the Ministry of Development ordered all state governors to comply with federal regulations on agrarian issues,¹²⁵ and the January 1916 decree that formally established the CNA included a message to state governments reminding them that the Decree of 6 January 1915 was a federal ruling and could not be altered.¹²⁶ Carranza also revoked

¹²¹ Antonio Azuela de la Cueva has identified this phenomenon in later phases of the agrarian reform; see his ‘Ciudadanía y gestión urbana en los poblados rurales de Los Tuxtlas’, *Estudios Sociológicos*, 8: 39 (1995), pp. 485–500.

¹²² Richmond, ‘Factional Political Strife in Coahuila’, pp. 64, 66–7.

¹²³ Secretaría de Fomento, ‘Resolución pronunciada por el C. Presidente de la República en el expediente de Restitución de Ejidos promovido por el C. Presidente municipal de la Villa de Progreso’ (Coahuila), AGN, *Memorias de la Secretaría de Fomento*, vol. 6, no. 73 (26 July 1917), p. 861; Secretaría de Agricultura y Comercio, ‘Dotación de Ejidos a los vecinos de Villa de Castaños’ (Coahuila) and ‘Dotación de Ejidos a los vecinos del pueblo de Abasolo Nuevo’ (Coahuila), AGN, *Memorias de la Secretaría de Fomento*, vol. 8, no. 15 (19 Jan. 1918), p. 158.

¹²⁴ AGA, exp. 2324/198 (Las Cuevas, Acuña, Coahuila), leg. 3, ff. 55–6, 98, 122, 125.

¹²⁵ See ‘Acuerdo Número 1’ (19 Jan. 1916), reprinted in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 4, p. 251.

¹²⁶ ‘Acuerdo Número 2’ (19 Jan. 1916), in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 4, pp. 253–4. See also Ulloa, *Historia de la revolución mexicana*, p. 358; and Jorge Luis Ibarra Mendiola, *Propiedad agraria y sistema político en México* (Mexico City: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 1989), p. 211. ‘Circular Número 4’ of 1916 further instructed local agrarian commissions not to interfere with matters that extended beyond their jurisdiction, and it nullified state laws on agrarian issues (reprinted in Silva Herzog, *La cuestión de la tierra*, vol. 4, p. 259). ‘Circular Número 20’ of 1917 forbade governors to have their own legal advisors opine on a pending matter (Fabila, *Cinco siglos*, pp. 269–70).

federal laws that had initially given state governments some authority over the agrarian reform process. The Decree of 6 January itself, for instance, had permitted governors and military commanders a significant degree of autonomy by allowing them to endow villages with provisional land grants. Carranza banned such land grants in September 1916, however, with the legitimate excuse that provisional grants had fostered great strife and uncertainty.¹²⁷

Carranza's efforts to streamline land reform projects undertaken by even his closest allies were generally successful. One incident in the Xalapa–Coatepec region of Veracruz illustrates this point. In response to one hacienda owner's charges of illegal proceedings in Chiltoyac, the CNA warned Veracruz governor Cándido Aguilar (Carranza's son-in-law at the time) to obey a 31 August 1916 decree that invalidated all state laws on agrarian issues.¹²⁸ In addition, the CNA accused Aguilar's commission of having damaged property in the Chiltoyac area while working under local laws, particularly by allowing the indiscriminate felling of trees on hacienda lands. In October 1916 Aguilar received a telegram ordering him to suspend all work until the CLA was installed in the state of Veracruz.¹²⁹ Then, in November 1916, Carranza sent telegrams to all municipal presidents in Veracruz cautioning local committees and civil authorities not to infringe upon the jurisdiction of the CNA in Mexico City.¹³⁰ By June 1917 the new Veracruz CLA had supplanted Aguilar's old commission, and all resolutions passed before that time had to be reviewed in light of Article 27 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution. Requirements for restitution became increasingly strict, and few communities managed to furnish the documentation required by the agrarian bureaucracy.¹³¹ Ultimately, Chiltoyac's petition for restitution was rejected on the grounds that the dates of land losses could not be ascertained and that it was therefore impossible to clearly redemarcate the old boundaries.¹³² Instead, in 1920 interim president Adolfo de la Huerta authorised a land endowment, giving 1,350 hectares to 135 residents of Chiltoyac.¹³³ Thus, although the land grant initiated by Aguilar was ultimately

¹²⁷ The law was ratified in 1917 with 'Circular Número 31' (Fabila, *Cinco siglos*, pp. 282–3).

¹²⁸ 'Del Presidente de la CNA, al Gobernador en Orizaba' (24 Oct. 1916), Archivo del Cuerpo Consultivo Agrario (Veracruz), exp. 5113 (Chiltoyac, Xalapa).

¹²⁹ 'Telegrama del Departamento Agrario, al Ing. Aguirre' (21 Aug. 1916), ACAM–Veracruz, exp. 36 (Chiltoyac, Xalapa).

¹³⁰ 'Telegrama del Departamento Agrario' (16 Nov. 1916), in *Gaceta Oficial del Estado de Veracruz* (23 Nov. 1916), p. 2.

¹³¹ See, for example, the requirements listed in 'Circular Número 27' (24 July 1917), reproduced in Comisión Nacional Agraria, *Sumario de la Comisión Nacional Agraria* (Mexico City, 1917), pp. 353–4.

¹³² Not only did towns have to show their land titles, but they also had to demonstrate that they had lost possession of the titles after 25 June 1856.

¹³³ *Gaceta Oficial del Estado de Veracruz* (11 Dec. 1920), p. 4.

approved, the process through which this occurred was under the jurisdiction of the federal executive.

In effect, by the 1920s and 1930s, these and other important agrarian precedents had been firmly established. If we examine some of Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman's 'laboratories of the new [national] state' (the idea that some governors experimented in the 1920s and 1930s with social reforms that later became national policies) with specific regard to agrarian reform, we note that key features of this revolutionary project were already in place.¹³⁴ In the case of Veracruz, for example, Governor Adalberto Tejeda (1920–4 and, especially, 1928–32) supported the organisation of the powerful *Liga de Comunidades Agrarias y Sindicatos Campesinos del Estado de Veracruz* (League of Agrarian Communities and Peasant Syndicates of the State of Veracruz), vigorously promoted land reform, and doubled the staff and budget of the Veracruz CLA – but he did so within the rules set by federal legislation.¹³⁵ And in Yucatán, Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto (1922–4) managed to accelerate land reform not because he could alter national legislation on agrarian matters but because he used his authority as governor to determine the legal standing of population centres, in effect expanding the number of villages eligible to petition for a land grant or restitution.¹³⁶

Conclusion

This article has employed community-level archival evidence to show how villagers in various parts of Mexico negotiated their claims to land with different revolutionary factions even while armed struggles raged in the years after 1910. Mexico's revolutionary agrarian reform began early, driven forward by villagers' insistent demands for land. Key forms of organisation, petition and land distribution originated at the local level and retained both procedural elements and understandings about land rights that dated from the nineteenth century. By demonstrating the significance of local-level agrarian reform commissions and by linking their activities to the formation of a federal-level agrarian reform bureaucracy, this analysis has shown the

¹³⁴ Thomas Benjamin, 'Laboratories of the New State, 1920–1929: Regional Social Reform and Experiments in Mass Politics', in Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman (eds.), *Provinces of the Revolution: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1910–1929* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), p. 71.

¹³⁵ See also Heather Fowler-Salamini, 'Los orígenes de las organizaciones campesinas en Veracruz: raíces políticas y sociales', *Historia Mexicana*, 22: 1 (1972), pp. 52–76.

¹³⁶ Gilbert M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States, 1880–1924* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

important impact that popular pressures from below had on the overall character of the agrarian reform.

These exchanges produced what was in effect the first non-military national administration emerging from the revolution. This incipient centralisation process was, however, only possible because villagers supported it – by pragmatically employing agrarian reform laws and procedures in their struggles for land, and by demanding that higher-level offices formalise their land grants and mediate their grievances and factional struggles. In effect, then, villagers themselves, who were oftentimes involved in bitter inter- and intra-factional struggles at the local level, actively sustained the construction of a national agrarian bureaucracy.

In its interactions with local communities, the nascent federal agrarian administration issued rulings regarding the nature and distribution of property that had national effect. These rulings constituted the basis for national agrarian codes that would remain largely unaltered until 1992. The agrarian codes made an especially important contribution to the progressive expansion of central government authority because, unlike civil or penal codes, Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution eliminated state-level agrarian codes.

Developments during the 1910–20 period also had other enduring political effects. One of these was that the courts, which had played an active role in land-related matters during the nineteenth century, lost jurisdiction on agrarian matters (except in the form of amparo rulings that protected private property) for more than seven decades.¹³⁷ It was not until 1992 that the federal government created a new agrarian court system within the national judiciary, thereby replacing the executive-controlled agrarian administration that had served as a proxy agrarian court for the better part of the twentieth century.

There were important legacies for states and municipalities as well. State-level courts could not rule on agrarian matters, and state legislatures could not make laws concerning land tenure arrangements. State governments retained some authority within the postrevolutionary agrarian system only because they controlled local agrarian commissions (later called *comisiones agrarias mixtas*). Even though the CNA always had the last word, local commissions were vital cogs in the agrarian administration. Municipal governments were largely bypassed, however, except with regard to initial land distribution procedures. Once land was granted to villagers, municipal governments became nothing more than public service providers. As other scholars have shown for later periods, newly established ejidos became local self-governing centres (under the jurisdiction of the federal agrarian

¹³⁷ It was not until the 1960s that villagers acquired the right to seek amparo protection.

administration), acting autonomously in many civil domains that would otherwise have been the responsibility of state and municipal governments.

These findings contribute to recent social science debates regarding the ‘decentring’ of Mexico’s postrevolutionary regime. Wasserman has argued that there is ‘a new generation of Mexicanists who have concluded, based on intensive archival research at the state and local levels, that the once-positated omnipotent power of the post-revolutionary one-party state never existed’.¹³⁸ Yet as Francine Chasen-López cogently notes, ‘the operation of *decentering* requires a center’.¹³⁹ This article has employed archival research at the village level to tell a nationwide story of popular participation in the initial construction of a key component of this so-called centre: a federal agrarian bureaucracy and its associated legal regime. It has shown that national agrarian blueprints were drafted early in the revolutionary process, and that villagers actively sustained them. Whether the agrarian reform was actually challenged at the village level in later years, as much of the decentring literature seems to suggest, is another question. What this analysis has demonstrated is that, just as historians of nineteenth-century Mexico have found that villagers often supported and contributed to state formation, so too did villagers during the decade of 1910–20, despite the ongoing armed conflict. In fact, in their struggles to secure access to land, village revolutionaries appealed to national agrarian offices and laws in a manner that seemed ‘like the refrain of a well-rehearsed song’.¹⁴⁰

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Los esfuerzos por implementar una reforma agraria durante la fase armada de la Revolución mexicana (1910–20) han quedado en buena parte a la sombra de los acontecimientos más violentos de este periodo. Basado en expedientes del Archivo General Agrario de la Ciudad de México, este artículo muestra cómo habitantes de diferentes partes de México negociaron sus reclamos agrarios con los distintos regímenes revolucionarios, prestando atención en particular a los comités locales creados para fijar linderos, levantar censos de la población rural y repartir tierras. Estas negociaciones entre funcionarios agrarios y pobladores sentaron las bases de la primera administración nacional posrevolucionaria. Las instancias agrarias creadas a nivel federal fungieron como un poder legislativo,

¹³⁸ Mark Wasserman, ‘Review of Benjamin T. Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca*’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 42: 3 (2010), pp. 625–7.

¹³⁹ Francine R. Chassen-López, *From Liberal to Revolutionary Oaxaca: The View from the South, Mexico 1867–1911* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920–1935* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 148.

asumieron funciones cuasijudiciales y restringieron el papel de los gobiernos municipales y estatales, y estos rasgos caracterizarían la reforma agraria mexicana durante los siguientes 70 años. Al destacar las formas en que los primeros esfuerzos de reforma agraria contribuyeron a la formación del Estado, este artículo cuestiona la tendencia actual de las ciencias sociales a ‘descentrar’ el régimen posrevolucionario mexicano.

Spanish keywords: formación del Estado, Revolución mexicana, reforma agraria, legislación agraria, participación popular, federalismo

Portuguese abstract. Os esforços para instaurar a reforma agrária durante a fase de luta armada da Revolução Mexicana (1910–20) continuam em boa parte ofuscados por acontecimentos mais dramáticos ocorridos durante o período. Com base em registros guardados no Arquivo Geral Agrário na Cidade do México, é demonstrada o processo de negociação dos camponeses de diversas partes do México com os vários regimes revolucionários ao longo do período de luta armada, dando especial atenção aos comitês locais criados para medir as divisas entre as terras, a condução de pesquisas de censo dos vilarejos e a distribuição das terras. Estas negociações entre os oficiais agrários e os camponeses formaram os alicerces da primeira administração pós-revolucionária nacional. Os ascendentes escritórios agrários federais também operaram como um braço legislativo do governo, assumindo funções quase judiciais e restringindo o alcance dos governos municipais e estaduais; traços estes que caracterizariam a reforma agrária mexicana ao longo dos próximos setenta anos. Ao sublinhar as maneiras nas quais tentativas incipientes de reforma agrária contribuíram para a formação do estado, questiona-se a atual tendência nas ciências sociais de “descentralizar” o regime pós-revolucionário mexicano.

Portuguese keywords: formação do estado, Revolução Mexicana, reforma agrária, lei agrária, participação popular, federalismo