

From *haciendas* to rural elites: Agriculture and economic development in the historiography of rural Mexico

LAURA MACHUCA AND ALEJANDRO TORTOLERO

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A historiographical overview is presented in this work, in relation to two key issues in Mexican rural history: the hacienda and the social actors that moved the agricultural sector, particularly the rural elites. This analysis begins with the classic works of François Chevalier and Charles Gibson, then provides an overview of different approaches (functionalist, sectorial, regional, neo-institutional, business and environmental) to analysing the hacienda. The study focuses on the historiography of rural (or agrarian) elites and its remarkable presence in recent academic works. The authors contend that Mexican agrarian historiography has overflowed its regional geographic scope to become a reference for Latin American historical studies. The development of agrarian studies in Mexico, especially in relation to the hacienda system, stems from the interest in explaining the agrarian nature of the Revolution of 1910. Diverse and even contradictory interpretations have been proposed, which in perspective have allowed huge historiographical advances.

De las haciendas a las élites rurales: Agricultura y desarrollo económico en la historiografía rural mexicana

PALABRAS CLAVE: hacienda, élites, agricultura, desarrollo, rural.

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***E**ste artículo realiza un recorrido historiográfico sobre dos temas clave de la historia rural mexicana, como son la hacienda y los actores sociales que movían el sector agrícola, en particular las llamadas élites rurales. En primera instancia, se parte de los trabajos clásicos de François Chevalier y de Charles Gibson, y se hace un balance de los estudios que desde diferentes enfoques han abordado la hacienda: funcionalistas, sectoriales, regionales, neoinstitucionales, empresariales y ambientales. Después, el estudio se enfoca a la historiografía sobre las élites rurales (o agrarias) y la notable presencia que éstas han llegado a tener en las más recientes publicaciones. Se argumenta que existe un sólido bagaje en la historiografía agraria mexicana que ha desbordado el ámbito geográfico regional y ha devenido un referente para los estudios históricos latinoamericanos. Los autores sostienen que este desarrollo de los estudios agrarios en México, sobre todo en la hacienda, es consecuencia del interés por explicar el carácter agrario de la Revolución de 1910. Se han planteado diferentes interpretaciones, incluso hasta contradictorias, pero que en perspectiva han permitido enormes avances historiográficos.*

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Laura Machuca [<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0179-3212>] is Researcher Professor of History at the Center of Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS Peninsular). Address: Parque Científico y Tecnológico, Sierra Papacal, 97302 Mérida (México). E-mail: laurama@ciesas.edu.mx

Alejandro Tortolero [<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6492-0688>] is Professor of History at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa. Address: Av. San Rafael Atlitxco 186, Leyes de Reforma 1ra Secc, Iztapalapa, 09340 Ciudad de México (México). E-mail: tortoleroalejandro@yahoo.com

Agrarian studies in Mexico have achieved notable advances. In addition to the functionalist, Marxist and social approaches developed through the 20th century, the two decades of the 21st have witnessed the emergence of a broad range of sectorial, regional, neo-institutional, entrepreneurial and environmental studies, among other types. The first part of this article presents a balance of the different tendencies that arose from the classic studies of François Chevalier and Charles Gibson and led us to where we are today. The chronological limits of our analysis span the rural historiography of colonial and national Mexico published over the last forty years as we attempt –within the space constraints of an article– to cover the length and breadth of the country¹. The second part places emphasis on studies of elites –that lived in towns or on *haciendas* and ranches– who have been called, variously, provincial, agrarian, villagers and, more recently, rurals. Finally, we argue that this solid baggage of Mexicanist agrarian historiography has gone beyond the regional geographic level to become a referent for historical studies throughout Latin America.

2. FROM THE CLASSICS TO THE PRESENT: ANALYTICAL TENDENCIES

Chevalier's classic work on the origins of latifundia in Mexico (1999) provided a plethora of valuable information on large estates in New Spain. The account in turn, stretched beyond Mexico to become a valid model for other regions. This was due, perhaps, to the innovative character of his proposal for a “regressive history” and the application of the ideas of his mentor, Marc Bloch, in an effort to sustain a “borderless” rural history concerned more with methods and problems than geographies².

Some years later, Gibson's (1989) outstanding study of the Valley of Mexico in the colonial era introduced a whole set of long-disdained topics and sources. He included Indigenous communities, *rancheros* (small farmers) and peons as key actors in the agrarian world, not simply extras in a film whose protagonists were all landowners.

For all their value, however, those works did not modify the general dynamics of agrarian history in Latin America or reduce the weight of 1960's dependence theory. The latter with its simplistic vision of backwards, dependent, dualist agriculture based on a model of a progressive “capitalist” export sector and peasant masses tenuously linked to a “nat-

1. The works reviewed were selected as representative of each model elucidated. The authors are aware that the primary focus is the colonial period and the 19th century. Research on the 20th century merits a separate article.

2. On Chevalier's contributions to Mexican historiography, see TORTOLERO (2014a).

ural” subsistence economy that provided cheap labor for the small, but dominant, export sector.

In the 1970s, two edited works offered evidence that foretold a change in the economic and agrarian history of Latin America. The first tome discussed modes of production in the region in relation to the importance of internal American markets, especially the mining sector, as determining factors of those economies because they played decisive roles in the formation of their agrarian sectors. That book also stood out for its extensive use of direct sources. The second was the compilation of papers from the Rome Congress that examined the functioning of those grand production units and their characteristics, also based on original sources (Assadourian, 1973; Florescano, 1975).

2.1. Marxist historiography

The influence of Marxism in Mexico was truly large due, among other factors, to the fecund renewal proposed by historical materialism; first, through the search for a global or universal history capable of simultaneously capturing distinct aspects of social life (economic and intellectual/psychological, social and political); second, through its commitment to open itself, without restrictions, to the distinct sciences; and, third, through its interest in studying structures, not superficial events, the collective, not the individual, and the everyday, not the accidental. If we add to this its interest in the quantitative methods employed so widely by Marx, then this line of thinking takes its place in the origins of the so-called *nouvelle histoire* (new French history). It is no coincidence that this approach was amply diffused in France in the works of Pierre Vilar, Jean Bouvier, Guy Bois, Michel Vovelle, Maurice Godelier, and many others³.

In Mexico, some scholars took up the task of tracing the roots of latent problems of underdevelopment in countries of the “third world”⁴. Their studies centered on the survival of a large feudal sector in Mexico’s countryside as the principle obstacle to capitalist development (Semo, 1978: 139-60; Assadourian, 1998: 18). Likewise, studies focusing on large estates identified two types of *haciendas*: one that manifested work and

3. See BOIS (1988: 432-50).

4. Of course, with the creation of communist parties the *hacienda* system and large landed estates were deemed major obstacles to progress (VIVIER, 2009: 11). For Latin America, Manuel Chust has demonstrated the importance of the 1928 International Socialist, which characterized the region as semi-feudal and semi-colonial, and called for a research program that would emphasize these features and the virtues of agrarian reform (CHUST, 2015: 83). Thanks to Carlos Roberto Cruz for opportunely updating the bibliography originally published in TORTOLERO (1992, 2008).

productive functions similar to those of European feudal estates; and another that transitioned from pre-capitalist production towards “capitalist social” production. The focus of Leal and Huacuja’s study (1982: 27–49), for example, was the operation of the *hacienda* of San Antonio Xala as a transitional form, since the nature of its agricultural production stemmed from the low technological level of its constituent units, despite enormous profits obtained from the sale of *pulque*. According to inventories, those estates functioned with typical, precarious tools of the countryside. The work force performed specific functions, but their wages (in cash or in kind) were determined more by the seasonal or permanent nature of their labors.

Morin’s works on the diocese of Michoacán in the second half of the 18th century (1979: 101–10; 1999: 76) provide a detailed reconstruction based on interpreting the *hacienda* from a feudal model. He demonstrated that the tithe (*diezmo*), paid in cash, give a false impression of the movement of agricultural production in both the short and long term, since the revenue resulting from it does not correspond to the production reported. While from 1700 to 1810 that source of income increased fivefold, accounts from the *haciendas* reveal two key periods of the agricultural economy. The first, from 1724 to 1731, registered an expansion of both cultivation and cattle-raising, but the second (1749) was a period of crisis in agriculture marked by high prices and, after 1761, market contraction due to depressed mining activity in the region. Morin goes so far as to state that agricultural production did not even double between 1760 and 1810, as it did from 1700 to 1760; thus the figures for the tithe do not coincide with those of agricultural production⁵.

Assadourian (1998: 50–6) applied his theoretical model⁶ that conceives of mining production as the economic motor and articulating axis of internal markets in New Spain and Perú⁷. He questions the existence of a colonial feudalism based on an examination of the *hacienda*’s work system and, especially, the interaction between *hacendados* and labourers, who were usually landless outsiders. He also undertook a project to address the following problems: Indigenous participation in internal markets; new social relations

5. For another version, see SILVA (2008). It is pertinent to point out that while the studies of decimal series in Spain and France virtually exhausted the analysis of existing sources, in Mexico –despite the efforts of Morin, Pastor, Florescano, Carmagnani and others– much remains to be done in this regard; see GOY (2007).

6. This theoretical model is based on the postulates of Fausto Elhuyar, General Director of Mining in New Spain in 1786; see ELHUYAR (1825).

7. According to ASSADURIAN (1998: 22–4), the starting point of the economic system was mining, since its final product (money as a commodity) could be realized immediately internationally. Since mining articulated the internal market, when its production declined the activities that depended on it (like agriculture) were strongly affected by the “economic motor” (*fuera de arrastre*) of this predominant production.

formed with the incorporation of Mestizo and Black populations; the scope of mining companies; and the emergence of tenant farmers (*arrendatarios*), among other related topics.

Marxist studies conducted in different contexts of New Spain have elucidated the deficiencies of the productive and labor systems, the low technology employed, and the ineffectiveness of workers in the face of adverse weather. At the same time, they shed light on the *hacienda* as a social space characterized by both conflict and co-existence due to the stratification of work and the bonds between workers and administrators or owners (Semo & Pedrero, 1973: 113-44). The works analyzed indicate that these features resemble the vital signs of a feudal economy, though they also point out distinct elements which suggest that they were approaching a capitalist economy. In summary, Marxist studies examine the *hacienda* and land tenure systems in rural Mexico through their articulation with capitalism, and so classify them as traditional, transitional or modern. If colonial Mexico pertains to the first condition, then the modern one finds more exploitations than the second and third types, above all, in terms of the system of large landed estates.

2.2. Functionalist studies

By characterizing *haciendas* in terms of their functions in space, this approach offers three important advantages. First, they allow more accurate assessments of the transcendence and importance of a specific *hacienda* in its region by emphasizing the spatial aspect. Second, they facilitate the study of exploitations beyond the central place (*i.e.*, the Manor House) of those estates to better understand the surrounding environment; that is, the different ecological soils surrounding the Manor House⁸. Finally, they permit the construction of typologies and hierarchies while also identifying the causes of their development.

Other typologies have been based on the nature of production, including grain, cattle, minerals or plantations (henequen, sugar, etc.), among others. Hierarchies emerged as a function of the utilization of space, which can be divided into three parts: the area

8. Similar to the castle of Versailles, which seemed to attract the gaze of the researchers who synthesized Versailles as the representation of the king and monarchy, where the nature of power clouded the understanding of power and generated a vast literature on the castle, but not on its surroundings, in Mexico, the Manor House (*casa grande*) of the *hacienda* mimicked this French current, while the introduction of functionalism there began a slow erosion of the central place that acquired notoriety with environmental studies; see Versailles, also QUENET (2015: 44-6).

exploited directly by the *hacendado* (the best lands), fields cultivated by tenant farmers (peripheral spaces), and reserve territories⁹. In these approaches, the roots of development are closely-tied to industrial spaces, markets and means of communication, so exploitations located in purely rural or peripheral zones would have been unable to access the pathway to progress. In this regard, it is worth mentioning Serrera's (1977) work on ranching in the Guadalajara region, Barret's monograph (1977) on sugarcane production on the *hacienda* of the Marqués del Valle; and Wobeser's (2004) study of Morelos' sugarcane *hacienda*. In all these contributions, space functioned as an explicative variable for understanding the productive nature of the *hacienda*.

2.3. Sectorial studies

This analytical focus isolates specific networks of relations in a given economy; for example, the *encomienda*, which Zavala studied in detail and distinguished from the *hacienda*¹⁰; Borah's analysis of the *repartimiento de indios* (a 17th-century mechanism for assigning laborers to *haciendas*)¹¹; and Wobeser's (2010) enlightening account of the Church, which was the principle credit institution¹² during the colonial period. Those institutions were all tightly-linked to the countryside of New Spain, though each one operated in distinct circumstances.

Studies dealing with issues of land tenure, the history of prices and fiscal history can also be placed in this approach. Regarding the first topic, Martínez's book (1984) on the seignury (*señorío*) of Tepeaca demonstrates the continuity of political-territorial organization from the pre-Hispanic period to the late 16th century, while Pérez Rocha's work

9. According to WOBESER (1989: 69-87), for example, grain *haciendas* were located at high and medium elevations in the central highlands, while cattle *haciendas* occupied marginal zones –primarily in the northern reaches of the Vice-royalty– and sugarcane and tropical product plantations were found in lowlands with hot climates. Demand for land and water depended on the type of exploitation.

10. The *encomienda* was implemented in New Spain after the Conquest and predominated into the early 18th century in central Mexico. In places like Yucatán, it endured until 1820. This institution granted the *encomendero* the right to obtain tribute and labor, but not to own land. In this way, it differed from the *hacienda*; see ZAVALA (1940).

11. In an effort to ascertain population fluctuations in New Spain, BORAH (1982) showed how the *repartimiento de indios* derived from the decrease of the Indigenous population in the 17th century, which gave rise to debt peonage, mainly on *haciendas*.

12. Today, studies of ecclesiastic credit and other moneylending institutions and corporations and how they influenced the agricultural sector abound; see the articles in the book by MARTÍNEZ LÓPEZ-CANO and VALLE (1998).

(2016) elucidates disputes over land and water between the old Indigenous inhabitants and Spanish colonizers in the villa of Tacuba post-Conquest and the usufruct of land by Indigenous religious corporations. Other works, including those by Brading (1988), Ladd (1984) and Artís (1993), also analyzed the control of land and the prestige that accrued to landowners.

Though differentiated by their respective objects of study, both the history of prices and fiscal history examine questions of property. In this regard, the studies of price fluctuations illustrate the role of *hacendados* and their estates. Throughout the 18th century, these were characterized by their tendency to speculate on grain shortages during the crop year in order to raise prices and obtain huge profits. Examples of this type of research include Florescano (1986) on corn, García Acosta (1988) on wheat, and Quiroz (2005) for the case of meat. In contrast, by studying civil¹³ and ecclesiastical¹⁴ tax levies in specific districts, or the entry and exit of articles from one sales tax region (*suelo alcabalatorio*) to another, fiscal history provides information on producers and the estates that were assessed (as in the case of the tithe or other concrete taxes, like the one levied on pulque)¹⁵ and, in some cases, on production.

The Ancien Régime in Mexico began to erode due to the onslaught of Porfirian modernity and its widely-studied entrepreneurial sector. In Schumpeter's view (1990), those social actors spurred economic growth by implementing innovations and risking their capital and competencies to form new commercial societies and forge new business opportunities. The entrepreneur's role consisted in reforming or revolutionizing production routines through modern means of exploitation or by inventing novel technical devices. The history of entrepreneurship in Mexico has not achieved the importance it has in other countries, but our impression is that colonial entrepreneurs were actually quite traditional actors, while in the national period –into the late 19th century– innovative entrepreneurs took on greater importance¹⁶. The *hacendado* who rented his fields in the Mexican countryside eventually ceded his place to innovative entrepreneurs in sectors linked to large markets, like the agriculturalists of northern Mexico and sectors integrated in internal grain and sugar markets¹⁷.

13. GARAVAGLIA and GROSSO (1987b); SILVA (1993, 2008).

14. MEDINA (1983); ORTEGA (2015).

15. HERNÁNDEZ PALOMO (1979); SÁNCHEZ SANTIRÓ (2007).

16. See MARICHAL and CERUTTI (1997: 9-38).

17. On agriculture in the north, see the diverse works coordinated by CERUTTI and ALMARAZ (2013), GÓMEZ ESTRADA and ALMARAZ (2011), and, on grain and sugarcane agriculture, TORTOLERO (2009, 2018), CRESPO (2009), CRESPO and ALFARO (1988), and HERNÁNDEZ CHÁVEZ (1993, 2010).

2.4. Regional studies

Regional history studies based on extremely heterogeneous sources focus on a specific economic region surrounding a city or mining center, for example, with its more distant rural areas characterized by complex agrarian structures that supplied foods, immigrants, trade, credit and sometimes even capital. In terms of the internal and external functioning of the associated production units, these analyses privilege inquiries into such areas as technology, class stratification, market production, capital accumulation, political-legal systems, and the role of entrepreneurs, among others¹⁸. By examining production and the destination of the fruits of *haciendas*, ranches and other small and medium producers –based on civil and ecclesiastical taxes (called *alcabalas* and *diezmos*, respectively)– this type of study demonstrates the growth or contraction of a regional economy in a certain period, though most concentrate on the 18th and 19th centuries¹⁹.

In the early decades of the 18th century in central New Spain (concretely the modern states of Puebla and Tlaxcala) agricultural and cattle production, as well as manufacturing, all stagnated when they lost markets in the Caribbean, Peru, Mexico City and the city of Puebla. The first three were snatched away by other regions with which producers in Puebla could not compete, while the latter suffered from a shrinking consumer population²⁰. According to Wobeser (2004: 63-179), the situation in what is now the state of Morelos was no different in the 17th century and through almost the entire 18th, as the sugarcane *haciendas* in the *alcaldías* of Cuernavaca and Cuautla saw their productivity drop due to low sugar prices that triggered higher production costs and reduced profits. To make matters worse, because of the burden of heavy taxation those properties began to pass frequently from one owner to another.

Young's study (1989: 124-30) of the Guadalajara region emphasizes that large landed estates there went through two phases. The first, from 1700 to 1760, was a period of scarcity marked by high prices that inevitably led to bankruptcies and forced owners to sell off their properties. In the second, from 1760 to 1815, rural lands in central Nueva

18. WOLF and MINTZ (1978: 493-531) described these elements of analysis.

19. CHEVALIER (1999) was one of the few scholars to analyze with precision the two centuries prior to the 18th. See COATSWORTH (1976).

20. GARAVAGLIA and GROSSO (1986). For ASSADOURIAN (1999), the rural economy of Tlaxcala was depressed in the late 18th century because its principle consumer market suffered marked population decreases in 1678 and 1746. MORENO (1998) illustrates the twilight of two passenger cities in the Puebla region (Atlixco and Cholula) that could not compete with the city of Puebla, while Orizaba and Córdoba flourished thanks to their strategic location on the road from Mexico City to Veracruz and their economic development.

Galicia became more profitable because agriculture was more attractive to investors due to cheap labor and because the main consumer market (the city of Guadalajara) was enjoying substantial growth.

For the area of the *Bajío*, Brading (1988: 46) underscored the fragility of large landed estates. On the one hand, up to the mid-18th century the rural population increased in density, as did the value of land, accompanied by a process of expansion along the agricultural frontier and greater investment in infrastructure, especially on the *haciendas*. However, competition for sales also intensified due to reduced consumer markets that were often quite distant and permitted only limited access. At that time, some *hacendados* abandoned production altogether, opting instead to simply rent out their fields. In general, even though the income obtained through rent could ascend to as much as 5% of the value of the property, in most cases those earnings were used to pay the taxes determined by property evaluation censuses.

Gibson (1989: 261-62) writes that the *haciendas* in the Valley of Mexico, unlike those farther north, were small production units with intensive production oriented towards markets in the capital. That kind of social and economic institution offered a lifestyle that was attractive to Indians who had lost their lands. According to Tutino (1991), in the late 18th century the *haciendas* that required workers began to hire Indians from nearby towns who had no access to land in their communities. This movement created a symbiosis between these two fundamental institutions of provincial life, which were further interlaced by intermediaries (parish priests, merchants, Indian governors, Spanish officials) who recruited manpower to work in the towns. We will return to this topic below.

For the case of Oaxaca, Taylor (1972, 1978) sustains that the expansion of Spanish property was impeded by Indigenous caciques and communities that conserved the best fields, even into the late colonial period. The *haciendas* there in the 18th century were characterized by low levels of investment destined mainly to the construction of irrigation infrastructure. Their main sources of income included proceeds from their harvests and cattle sales as well as rent paid by Indians or Mestizos to access arable fields; that is, the so-called *medieros* (sharecroppers) who returned half of their harvests to the Spanish owners.

Regional studies clearly show that markets, both rural and urban, received supplies from large landed estates, smaller properties and Indigenous peoples. Fiscal records offer glimpses of regional trade, as in the case of the detailed information in the ledgers of the *alcabalas* (taxes) levied in 1792 by officials of the Segundo Conde de Revillagigedo. In Valladolid, Michoacán, in that year, Indians took a broad array of products to market,

including vegetables, seeds, fruits, cattle and their derivatives, textiles and clothing, raw materials, grocery items, condiments, wine and liquor, fish and seafood, containers, and other merchandise that together represented 13.2% of trade in the city (Silva, 2008: 219-37). In Tepeaca, Indians effectuated a little over 50% of annual trade (Garavaglia & Grosso, 1987a), a figure reproduced in the market in Toluca (Menegus, 1995). In Tampico, the entry of Indigenous products contributed around 70% (Escobar, 2000), while in other regions, such as Tlapa, Puebla and Oaxaca, Indigenous trade played an important role in markets²¹. The fact is that in terms of the relations between *hacienda* and market, Indigenous peoples participated significantly in supplying agricultural products. These data indicate clearly that the Indigenous economy was neither “domestic” nor “natural”, and that it allowed those people some access to monetarization.

The contemporary history of Mexico shows that regional studies multiplied, fostered, at least in part, by the fine example of the work of Luis González y González, who drew attention to national statistics from another angle by dealing with local- and state-level data. His analysis of the proliferation of *rancheros* in Michoacán during the Porfiriata highlights inconsistencies in the national visions that predominated into the final third of the 20th century; visions which held that one particularly important cause of the 1910 Mexican Revolution was a top-heavy social structure in which a handful of *hacendados* that represented barely 3% of the population possessed 97% of the land. González y González showed that those views were distorted and went on to inaugurate an approach to research that writers like Falcón (1977, 2015), Meyer (1986), Martínez Assad (2001, 2015), Chassen (2004), Crespo (2009), Aboites (2013), and Cerutti (2018), among many others, soon pursued with outstanding results²².

In summary, regional studies have not only revealed variations among different regions, but have also analyzed in great detail land tenure systems, property conflicts, demographic tendencies, production, prices, market access, the relations or linkages between *hacendados* and Indigenous and Spanish authorities, dependence on credit and indebtedness – mainly to the Church–, associations of producers and merchants that created modern “capitalist” enterprises, and the working conditions of laborers, among numerous other important issues.

21. See, respectively, DEHOUE (1994), TORALES (1994) and SÁNCHEZ SILVA (1993).

22. See GONZÁLEZ Y GONZÁLEZ (1972: 74) who shows the imprecision of general statistics in the study of San José of Gracia. Regarding studies of regional history in contemporary Mexico, there is a huge bibliography. For syntheses that do not exhaust the topic, see YOUNG (2010a), MARTÍNEZ ASSAD (2001) and CERUTTI (2018).

While it is true that Mexican rural history advanced primarily through the microscope wielded by local and regional historians –as occurred as well at a certain juncture of French historiography– it also demonstrated that attempts to construct Mexico’s agrarian history by piecing together results from diverse regions were not fruitful due to differences in the methods, sources and interests of the historians involved. Due, precisely, to their globality, analyzing social totalities is a challenging intellectual operation, one played out through the modalities employed to put it into practice. In France, knowledge of the whole stemmed from its parts, which explains the predominance of local monographies over a twenty-year period that reflected the epistemological belief that global knowledge progresses through the accumulation of local knowledges. It is not possible, however, to elaborate a general history as if it consisted of the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The fact is that other methods are required, as well as other scales and indicators. This topic has been analyzed in a longstanding seminar on agrarian history in Mexico²³.

2.5. New contributions

Over the past twenty years, new tendencies have emerged that we analyze briefly in this section. The first is the neo-institutional framework. While works on rural property in Mexico have been around for a long time, analyses of property and economic growth are quite a recent phenomenon²⁴. In effect, a glance at institutional economics shows that it understands institutions as essential agents of progress, both economic and agricultural. The existence of clear property rights is a key factor for the expansion of production, while a perfect property system was an indispensable condition for achieving progress in agriculture. This approach assumes that this was what led to the enclosure movement in England, while in France the Revolution and adoption of the Civil Code beyond national borders drove economic development in the countryside. However, research by Gérard Béaur (1998; Béaur and Chevet 2018) revealed that no such enclosure movement occurred in France, and that England never adopted a Civil Code or established absolute property rights. Moreover, while the development of large landed estates in Britain was marked by innovation, the small properties characteristic of France participated only marginally in that experience. A strong, absolute and perfect system of property rights facilitates,

23. On French regional history and the problems of method, see LEPETIT (1999), who points out how Labrousse and Braudel attempted to elaborate a history of France by integrating regional studies by Vilar (Catalonia), Goubert (Beauvais), Baehereel (lower Provence) and J. C. Perrot (Caen), among others. On the SEHAM, see <http://historiaagrariamexicana.org>

24. For classic works on property, see MENEGUS (1991, 1994). An interesting proposal suggests studying the *hacienda* in its institutional aspect; see KUNTZ (2010).

among other things, the circulation of property through a real estate market free of impediments to its functioning. By the same token, an active real estate market makes it possible to guarantee a selection of the best farmers and promote increases in production.

Spurred by this example, various historians have examined this field for the Latin American world, though they have come up with distinct responses. Although their works do not fit squarely into the neo-institutional current, Reina (2013) and Kouri (2013) examine the relations between property and economic growth. In his study of Oaxaca, for example, Reina (2013) states that the Zapotecs were able to maintain strong communal cohesion and significant economic growth despite the fact that they were not landowners. For Veracruz, Kouri (2013) demonstrates that in late 1897, after 10 years of uncertainty and conflict, and in spite of two large rebellions, the 17 largest estates in Papantla had been divided into approximately 3,500 private plots. The beneficiaries of that division were a group of *notables*: merchants of foreign origin, Indigenous caciques, and government functionaries of diverse origin. That case of property division produced a broad exclusion of the original inhabitants (Totonacs) but provides a perspective for studying the relation between property rights and economic growth²⁵.

Turning to environmental approaches, we find that they emerged in Mexico out of distinct traditions that consolidated around the turn of the 21st century²⁶. Boyer and Cariño (2013), for example, pointed out the need to study the different *environmental revolutions in Mexico* in which the rural world appears as a *laboratory of transformations*²⁷. Adopting a distinct viewpoint, various authors analyzed the long duration of the most essential aspects of the violent transformations in environmental matters that can be traced back to the introduction of cattle-ranching, tropical plantation crops like sugarcane, the practices of a high-intensity, organic economy, and the transition of various organic economies into one based on mineral extraction and the onset of industrialization²⁸. These contributions allow us to examine the Mexican countryside more effectively, not only as a producer of corn—a crucial element of culture and economy—but of all rural resources: forests, water and biotic and abiotic media.

25. For an analysis of other Latin American cases, see the book coordinated by ÁLVAREZ, MENEGUS and TORTOLERO (2018).

26. On traditions, see TORTOLERO (1996, 2014b). The first book on environmental history is, without doubt, MELVILLE's (1999). We owe the first coordination of works on central Mexico to TORTOLERO (1996).

27. For a critique of this approach see TORTOLERO (2014b).

28. BOYER (2012); CANDIANI (2014); EVANS (2007); JUÁREZ (2012); VITZ (2018); SALAS (2016); SANTIAGO (2006); WAKILD (2011).

Analyzing the *hacienda* as the space in which social actors live and recreate themselves is fundamental because it broadens the traditional economic conception that has long held sway (Tortolero, 1995). This approach turns the *hacienda* into a political institution and a social organization endowed with linkages. Here, the study of networks, clientelisms and mechanisms like the moral economy offered fecund approaches that drove this tendency. If a call was made to deepen these studies thirty years ago, a powerful field of analysis has now been consolidated, one that is the object of the second part of this historiographic treatise.

3. TOWARDS A CHARACTERIZATION OF RURAL ELITES IN MEXICO

The study of urban elites appears as a recurrent theme in Mexican historiography. While a significant nucleus of those elites had some business interests in the countryside (lands, *haciendas*, etc.), it would be inaccurate to consider them “rural” because they did not develop their principle activities in that space. Brading (2004) offered one of the best descriptions of these absentee owners, miners and merchants, but another important group, one made up of landowners and cattle-ranchers, was quite powerful at the local level whether its members lived in towns, villas, *haciendas* or ranches.

The topic of rural elites is not a recent one in either European or Latin American historiography, but earlier focuses were distinct because they were present in analyses but did not take center stage. There is a broad consensus in European historiography that Menant and Jessene’s book (2007) marked a watershed in this field of study. This is not to say, by any means, that we should pass over the rich French tradition of rural history since Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and the series of monographs produced in the 1970s and 80s but Menant and Jessene’s grand achievement (2007: 24-7) was to characterize rural elites globally, not only on the basis of their status as landowners. Their book describes them as a broad, heterogeneous social group that occupied an intermediate position between the peasantry and the aristocracy, but that shared some common traits, such as the exploitation of the land and a certain level of economic advancement generated from their fields as well as through processes of diversification in which they functioned as intermediaries (brokers) for different social groups and, often, occupied public offices in local institutions.

Another important author in the field of rural French history is Nadine Vivier²⁹, who has studied 19th-century elites –which she calls *agrarian*– in great detail. She points out

29. VIVIER (2009) includes Tortolero’s work on the elites of Chalco in the Basin of Mexico.

that we must not lose sight of their time and place or try to pigeonhole them. Her work shows that those elites were concerned with profit, the search for resources, and attending to their workers.

Turning to Spanish historiography, we find that it has also shown interest in these groups. A monographic issue of the journal *Ayer* (2002) devoted to agrarian elites describes them in terms of their relation to the land, stressing the fact that this was their main source of wealth. The authors in that issue agreed that their object of study was not just a landowning nobility, and that those elites should not be considered anti-modern or conservative. In addition, they insisted that scholars must cease to see the countryside as a synonym of backwardness³⁰.

Aparisi (2013) and Aparisi and Royo (2014), in particular, has taken up the term rural elite and reflected on the pertinence of applying it to medieval Iberian societies. He underscores the term's conceptual utility since it does not refer to any strictly-defined social or professional category, but signals a diversification of wealth and a certain capacity for exercising power. Aparisi proposes an additional line of inquiry, one outlined, but not explored, by Menant and Jessene in France, which centers on the phenomena of social mobility, both upward and downward. Those topics are not new either since, at least in Mexico, they have been analyzed for some years now (*e. g.* Mentz, 2003).

Rural agrarian elites have long been present in Mexican historiography through diverse focuses and perspectives, as wealthy residents of towns have figured prominently in classic works like *Pueblo en vilo* and analyses of "those of above", who were usually "lords of lands and cattle, merchants and professional people": *señores de tierras y ganados, comerciantes y profesionistas* (González y González, 1972: 285). Few advances were noted in succeeding years, however, perhaps because of the image that Chevalier (1999) –despite himself– posited of the rich *hacendado* as an almost feudal "lord". It was not until the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s that modifications of this perspective began to appear.

Brading (1988) studied the broad, heterogeneous group of *hacendados* and *rancheros* in León (Guanajuato) that included groups from flourishing farmers to poor fieldworkers. Those who opted to exploit their properties directly did not lack the comforts of life and had no need to invest their capital in commerce or mining. Indeed, it appears that *hacienda* owners in the late 18th century sensed an urgency to make improvements, which led to their cattle and lands increasing in value. However, the process of Mexican independence tumbled many into debt and, eventually, ruin. In fact, intensive agriculture was

30. See, especially, the works of MUÑOZ (2002), and MOLL and SALAS (2002).

largely abandoned in that period and the rural elite diversified its activities with landed properties beginning to pass quickly from one owner to another. Brading emphasizes that the success or failure of enterprises depended much less on economic tendencies than personal astuteness, such as the strategy of eluding, insofar as possible, ecclesiastical censuses. But Brading also paid close attention to processes of social mobility. In this regard, it is important to mention that Garavaglia and Grosso (1990, f. n. 16) consider Brading's book *the best study of small-scale renters and rancheros*.

Shortly afterwards, Jacobs (1982) analyzed the figure of the *ranchero* in Guerrero and his participation in the Mexican Revolution. He characterized those *rancheros* as small landowners who belonged to sectors of a middle class. Jacobs' work follows the *ranchero* from the 19th century, when several new *cacicazgos* were created through economic development, but focuses on the Figueroas, who dominated the northern reaches of the state, and their role as protagonists during the key years from 1911 to 1917. This account ends with the downfall of that family followed by a gradual recovery towards the year 1940, the period of agrarian reform that operated in favor of *ejidatarios* and certain clever *rancheros* who figured out how to satisfy their ambitions by taking possession of land.

Garavaglia and Grosso (1990), in turn, wrote a pioneering article with the objective of drawing a portrait of the landowners and commercial groups in Tepeaca, a peripheral region of Puebla. Their main question was: what is it that led people to enter, or exit, this world of elites? In their study of that specific place –as a model–, they first observed the complex network of polymorphic ties that interweave through rural societies where the familial blends with the economic and the political and large renters co-existed with *rancheros*, small-scale tenants, all manner of farmers, and *hacendados*. They show that the renters constituted an intermediate group of agricultural producers, one with a social logic similar to that of the *hacendados* and, in fact, that several renter families became large landowners after the period of independence.

These authors also elaborated a characterization of the principle families, a task that led them to identify distinct models: families that had endured as landowners for centuries, others that combined local accumulation of wealth and power with successful networks of economic and consanguineous bonds, and still others who stood out for the local focus of their commercial interests. Although the latter survived the crisis of Independence, they never expanded out of their home region. Garavaglia and Grosso thus demonstrated that the energies of that elite were not oriented only to accumulating and hoarding fortunes but, rather, that they spent resources to protect the values they deemed fundamental, including a prominent social position and religious piety. In this way, they reaffirmed their identity and differentiated themselves from others.

Garavaglia and Grosso distinguished three important moments in the development of those families: 1) the second half of the 18th century, marked by greater mobility, that ended with the Bourbon reforms; 2) the Independence period, which was less disruptive than is often thought; and 3) the debacle brought on by the Reform Laws in the decade of 1860.

Between 1990 and 1999, Mexican historiography experienced significant advances in the topic that concerns us. García Ugarte (1992: 97), for example, examined the transformations of rural landowners, in particular the proliferation of ranches and, as a result, also of *rancheros*, in the periods 1830-60 and 1900-10. In the first, the fragmentation of the old *haciendas* and the changes generated by the Reform Laws, such as “the disentanglement (*desamortización*) of the large estates triggered the social, political and economic diversification of rural landowners”, helped along by legislation that fostered the development of individual, private property.

Young (1992: 259-65) also identified a group that belonged to the middle rural sector, one made up of intermediaries –in the typological and functional sense of the term– who constructed important links between peasants and higher commercial circuits. This group formed above all by renters, he called *rancheros*. Generally-speaking, those *rancheros*, or “small livestock farmers”, barely scraped by dependent, as they were, on family labor. Their properties were small and fragmented by inheritance, and their technology simple. Their origins were unknown but because they were *ambitious and able*, they diversified their activities, becoming administrators, merchants, functionaries (*corregidores* and *subdelegados*) and muleteers. Their role was that of middlemen, or “buffers”, who enjoyed limited possibilities for economic and social mobility.

In *Mexican rural history since Chevalier* Young (2010a: 66-67), writes only briefly of rural landowners, but his comments are pertinent: *What was the nature of the patriarchal regimen of the lords of the Mexican countryside, and how does it compare to that of other areas of Latin America?* It is true, he affirms, that the lords and their allies exercised power at the local level, but it does not suffice to say that they occupied positions on town councils (*cabildos*), or served as magistrates, etc., for this does not explain “the complexities” of their “influence”. Due to the heterogeneity of this group, he suggests exploring their rivalries and fractures.

Tortolero (1995, 2008, 2009) has examined the development of *haciendas* including, of course, the identity of their owners. His studies center on the region of Morelos and Chalco where, he argues, the *hacendados* were neither idlers nor men unconcerned with profit. In fact, he found that they adapted to market conditions and innovated insofar as

that was possible. It would not be correct, however, to consider their *haciendas* modern enterprises in the current sense of the term because their internal organization functioned distinctly; for example, through peonage. He characterizes the Chalco elite on the basis of changes between the colonial era and the period of the Revolution, assuming that the colonial *hacienda* owners who operated in the final period of the government of New Spain (the Ramírez, Rivas Cachos and Basocos) were succeeded by powerful politicians like Iturbide, Riva Palacio or Guerrero in the first half of the 19th century. Concurrently, we witness the emergence of a new kind of entrepreneur (exemplified by the Noriegas, Solórzanos and Del Macorras) at the end of that century and in the early decades of the 20th century.

With this vision in mind, it becomes possible to approach these rural societies from a distinct perspective that visualizes entrepreneurs concerned with ensuring that their activities enjoyed success. In this line of inquiry we find Gómez Serrano's book (2000), which shows how a rural middle class was consolidated during the 19th century, before the process of disentanglement that began in the 1850s resulted in the break-up of the *haciendas*. He observes that the rural middle class in Aguascalientes was strengthened with the emergence of ranches; understood as properties that guaranteed the sustenance and social status of their owners.

It is clear that the 21st century has witnessed a growing interest in the study of these rural elites in order to achieve a better identification. If we were to undertake a balance of the variable studied most intensively at the end of the past century, *rancheros* would stand out, as they became the rural elite *par excellence*. One important work in this regard is by Lloyd (2001), where the *ranchero* and his material culture assume a significant role. The most interesting aspect of Lloyd's approach is that it allows us to perceive the development of this group and its members in the context of the specificities of the space they inhabited, their processes of territorial appropriation, and their everyday practices³¹.

Another promising line of research shows that Indigenous peoples also formed part of rural elites, and were not always simply poor and exploited. Birrichaga (2003), for example, studied the role of the local governments (*ayuntamientos*) of towns in Texcoco in the 19th century, paying special attention to their finances and the administration of *proprios y arbitrios*³². His approach allows us to gain a clearer idea about the amounts of re-

31. In a recent article, ULTRERAS and ISAIS (2018) present an interesting historiographic balance on the role of *rancheros*, and ask if perhaps they formed part of a peasant bourgeoisie.

32. The two main sources of income for the *ayuntamientos*. *Proprios* refers to rustic and urban pro-

sources available to residents, which is important because it focuses on the social actors that participated in the internal functioning of towns. Birrichaga observes that in the mid-19th century there were differences in the administration of communal properties among towns in Texcoco that usually involved rented fields; a key process to which she devotes several pages. The author also analyzes the capacity of the members of each *ayuntamiento* to negotiate those operations and their conduction under distinct conditions.

Likewise, Mendoza (2004) studied the municipality of Santo Domingo Tepehene in Oaxaca. One chapter of this book illustrates how local authorities maintained control of the confraternity (*cofradía*) until the 1860s, before its lands were made available for sale in 1869. They did, however, continue to control some communal properties that gave the municipality a certain autonomy since, in addition to exploiting fields, residents also made their living by raising cattle and manufacturing and commercializing palm hats. Prominent merchants and ranchers there exploited communal pasturelands, monopolized production, served as middlemen with the closest city (Tehuacán, Puebla) acted as political leaders, and led the movement to defend their lands.

Later, in his study of Chocholtec towns, Mendoza (2011) pondered this group's response to liberal policies and the diverse forms of resistance they adopted. That study focused on the municipal finances that were at their disposal thanks to resources like land rentals, communal labor on arable fields, cattle sales and confraternities, among others. The author places special emphasis on the importance of confraternities for municipal treasuries, *fiestas* and commerce. One principle objective is to demonstrate how the Chocholtecs were able to retain a margin of political and economic power and control over their natural resources in a game of give-and-take with government. Around the turn of the 19th century, lands of diverse types that had belonged to the municipalities passed into individual private property. Thus, Mendoza devotes part of his study to the *élites pueblerinas* (town elites) that served as mayors (*presidentes municipales*) or caciques, were moneylenders, took turns occupying civil and military positions, had the ability to read and write, and were deeply involved in the struggle to recover communal lands.

Young (2010b: 272) characterized these Indian notables in detail for the early 19th century as follows: *They were situated in the range of the town's rich, the hereditary Indigenous nobility (caciques and principales), and functionaries or ex-functionaries (gobernadores, alcaldes, regidores, escribanos, etc.), a strata of leaders that, near the end of the colonial period, represented perhaps 10% of the male Indigenous population in the countryside.*

erties like houses and lots, while the *arbitrios* consisted of taxes charged for certain kinds of services.

Machuca (2010) analyzed a whole set of wills and intestates from the Yucatán peninsula in the 19th century and succeeded in identifying several Indigenous Maya who owned *haciendas* and ranches. They formed a minority, but it is surprising to learn that this group included not only caciques who held control over territory and manpower, but that some Maya succeeded in forming their own patrimony through inheritance and hard work. Machuca inquiries into the milieus in which those Maya operated allowed her to reconstruct the social relations delineated in their wills; that is, the choice of spouses, executors and witnesses, and mentions of other relatives, priests and diverse figures³³. Their economic success was tightly-linked to the bonds they established, above all, with the non-Maya population, and the intelligence and capacity they applied in running their businesses. Some managed stores where, without doubt, they sold the excess products of their *haciendas* together with other goods.

In a study of the development of the *hacienda* in Yucatán from the second half of the 18th century, Machuca (2011) observed social mobility in towns fueled by the acquisition of rural properties, a process driven, after 1820, by the formation of local *ayuntamientos* (municipalities) and *juntas* (councils) that integrated these emerging owners who up to that point had figured only marginally in political life. The rural elite in Yucatán was made up mostly of *hacendados* and *rancheros* who resided in towns. They owned one or more rural properties and had workforces of varying size that included both full-time and casual laborers. Some had houses in town and held local political posts as members of municipal councils, conciliating judges, justices of the peace and, in some cases, positions in higher spheres as political leaders or *subdelegados* (subdelegates, local districts officials). Following Mennant and Jessenne's model, Machuca considers that they accumulated quantities of wealth and assumed roles as middlemen, especially as agents of the State who controlled part of the population, specifically the Maya. This means that they exercised some degree of power. In this line of thought, Romana Falcón's book (2015) on political bosses in the state of Mexico in the second half of the 19th century presents an excellent example of this type of multivalent elite.

This typology does not gloss over the enormous differences that might exist between owner-exporters and operators who only supplied local markets. These elites evolved and renewed themselves over time according to local circumstances and, therefore, should not be considered as static. A fall from grace, accumulated debts, or a failure in their clientelist network could all impact their careers. Nonetheless, this "categorization" does allow us to place them in the center of analysis, understand the ways in which they acceded

33. Following the suggestive works of Poloni-Simard on Ecuador; see, for example, POLONI-SIMARD (2002).

to resources, their modes of administration, and the processes of social mobility in which they were immersed.

But there is a need to learn still more about these rural elites, and this can only be achieved through additional analyses of various cases. The goal would be to observe the economic and social dynamics of these groups in specific spatial and temporal settings. Although the aforementioned works by Birrichaga and Mendoza did not set out to demonstrate processes of social mobility, they do highlight that some groups in Indian towns began to accumulate wealth power with the implementation of the Reform Laws. But at the same time, it is necessary to situate those individuals in the context of their families and surroundings, since we know that they did not act alone. Such studies of rural families would allow us not only to discover their composition, marital strategies (a key to preserving their patrimony) and descendance, but also to catch glimpses of their finances and relationships, and so conciliate cultural with economic history, as Young has proposed (2003). We also need to understand that approaching Mexican rural society exclusively from the Indigenous perspective would generate a partial image, so it is necessary to observe the totality and analyze how diverse groups co-existed in the same spaces. The key is to situate them in the context of their practices and strategies.

In reality, studies have established three domains in which we can trace the performance of rural elites. The first is economic and entails analyzing how they made their living, whether they owned *haciendas*, how they administered them, and if they also operated as merchants, muleteers or renters, etc. The second is institutional and involves situating them in their political activity; that is, whether they served on *ayuntamientos*, the positions they held, and other civil or religious roles they exercised. Third, and finally, comes the cultural sphere, which leads us into aspects of everyday life, including clothing, food, customs and religiosity.

With respect to sources, research conducted in other areas of Latin America can provide several clues. Garavaglia (1999) based his excellent analysis of *Pastores y labradores de Buenos Aires* on postmortem inventories of goods, which allowed him to focus attention on economic behavior. That study shows little interest in culture, though it could have developed this angle because those inventories revealed various aspects of material and spiritual culture.

Notarial sources can also be useful because they include wills, intestate successions and purchase/sale agreements of properties, all of which are privileged sources for the study of rural elites. Wills, especially, make it possible to capture the vision that social actors may have held regarding their situation, family size, children, spouses and executors. In fact,

it is sometimes possible to construct quite intimate images of the individuals involved. We can add to this the detailed lists of the properties they possessed, and glean clues to better understand, insofar as possible, the contexts in which they were inserted and that allowed them to develop. Other documents from the civil, criminal and parish domains can also help fill out versions of their life trajectories.

Analyzing wills may also help scholars discover the role of women in the rural world where they were inserted into matrimonial and relational “markets” as providers of children and, more generally, as contributors to the family economy. Several women also owned *haciendas* or ranches and, in some cases, administered them on their own (Machuca, 2011).

Another fundamental aspect that Aparisi recommends (2013: 29) is to inquire into the mechanisms of social promotion; that is, asking when families took the decision to emigrate to cities, the relations they maintained with their places of origin, and their habits and patterns related to consumption and culture. Finally, this review of sources of information would be incomplete if we failed to mention local archives. Studies like those by Lloyd, Mendoza and Birrichaga owe their important contributions primarily to municipal repositories that house, among many other things, lists of officials, positions in local government, and problems involving land. To this we must add parish records; that is, documents from the civil and religious domains that make it possible to identify powerful individuals in towns and their dynamics. This kind of research has benefitted, finally, from the fact that some states (Puebla, Oaxaca and the state of Mexico, for example), now recognize the importance of these archives, are cataloguing their holdings, and allow scholars open access to consult them. Without question, this has contributed richly to the development of the new rural history.

As this article shows, topics like agrarian and local elites are not new or recent aspects of Mexican historiography; rather, these groups have always been present, and the figure of the *ranchero* has emerged as a protagonist of that history. While it is true that great advances have been made since Brading’s pioneering work, there is a clear need to continue deepening our analyses of different regions to attain finer characterizations that include all the groups that fit under the broad umbrella of the term *rural elite*. The change in focus in recent years has also been fruitful as it has led scholars to extend their interests from Mestizo groups to include other sectors, such as Indigenous peoples and women. Of course, family and individual strategies continue to form the heart of these historians’ concerns.

4. IN THE WAY OF A CONCLUSION

The distinct focuses reviewed briefly herein show that the rural world in Mexico has been a focus of attention from the classic studies of Chevalier and Gibson to the latest works that integrate distinct perspectives and contributions (Marxist, functionalist, sectorial, regional, neo-institutional, environmental and social). The reason for this interest resides, to a large degree, in the reality that Mexico lived a violent revolution of an agrarian character, but that traditional explanations tended to emphasize that conflict was caused by the existence of a backwards rural sector. In effect, the grand syntheses of Mexico's agrarian history—written, above all, in the 1980s—carried out the task of transmitting this idea by elucidating that what existed at the foundations of the Mexican Revolution were the high social costs of a *hacienda* system that monopolized the nation's principle resources to the detriment of the economies of towns and small property owners. Although this thesis proved to be erroneous, it undeniably served as a stimulus for inaugurating a tradition of research that has overflowed the limits of Mexican historiography and transformed and consolidated the Mexican countryside in the Latin American world.

Without doubt, rural Mexican historiography has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades through the fine-tuning of its focuses and methodologies. But the classics profoundly influenced this change. Chevalier's study not only revealed the importance of the *latifundio*, it also opened the way for contributions by French historiography and the new French history. Later, Gibson introduced new actors, such as Indigenous communities, wages and markets, and detailed studies of sources. Florescano (1975) and Assadourian (1973) were nourished by those traditions but then transformed them into a research project that spans Latin America.

We have seen that the *hacienda* captured the attention of scholars throughout this long period. Today, it seems that the most adequate perspective is to conserve the best aspects of each one of these focuses (Marxist, environmental, functionalist, etc.) in order to analyze processes in all their complexity. The rural world is certainly broad and diverse and cannot be reduced only to the *hacienda*, although in Mexico the importance of this institution was great indeed. The history of *hacendados* and peons has been nuanced and there is no longer one sole model of the *hacienda* or its workers. If we owe anything to microhistory (Mexican and Italian) it is the fact that it rescued actors who had only appeared tangentially. Today, what interests us is not only getting to know those actors from the economic perspective, but also understanding their spaces, the physical environments that surrounded them, their practices and, more generally, what their lives were like.

This article also shows that the influences of Mexican agrarian history extend far beyond national borders like the Río Bravo and the Suchiate. Classics like those by Chevalier and Gibson were useful for understanding this continent, and the works of Young, Coatsworth, Tutino and Garavaglia have fulfilled a similar function. The contributions of the distinct currents of rural Mexican history have generated a fecund discussion in Latin American historiography, one that allows us to foresee a future of promising analyses.

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