

▲ *Americans should know more about
the revolution next door to them.*

MEXICO UNDER CÁRDENAS

BY NATHANIEL WEYL

ON December 1, 1940, General José Lázaro Cárdenas y del Río will cease to be President of Mexico. That date will mark the end of the most epochal years of Mexican history since Juarez. For in the six years of the Cárdenas administration there have occurred economic and social changes so profound and widespread that the period goes by the name of the "Cárdenas Revolution." Because it is next door to us, that revolution has not been seen whole or understood in the United States. We have been unable to view it as objectively as revolutions from which we are separated by oceans and continents.

In brief, Cárdenas has attempted to fulfill the promises made by every guerrilla revolutionary leader during the ten years of Mexico's civil war, 1910-1920. He has tried to carry out not only the letter but the spirit of those promises. And this attempt has affected Mexico's economic and political life irrevocably. It has marked a

long step towards a transformation from a semi-colonial, paternalistic, pre-industrial society to a more independent industrialized producing democracy. Its eventual character, both economic and political, is not yet clearly discernible, but its popular slogan, "Mexico for the Mexicans," has to a considerable degree been realized.

The Tarascan Indian, Lázaro Cárdenas, is a simple man. He has accumulated little book learning in the course of a peripatetic life. He is ignorant of the mysteries of the rediscount theories and would fall down in a debate on dialectic materialism. He is little concerned with the relation of his own ideas to the great ideologies that have stormed Europe. The fact that the Mexican death rate from diseases of the respiratory system is seven times that of the United States, because the bulk of his people are ill-clad, seems to him very important. Doctrines on indemnification for expropriated properties do not. Cárdenas has a vast practical

knowledge of his country. He is a master of political maneuver. He identifies himself completely with the rural poor from whom he sprang and feels uncomfortable in the presence of diplomats and business men. He is personally honest, but in terms of the Mexican bureaucratic tradition it is inevitable that some of his close advisers should be thieves. Although Cárdenas was one of the youngest divisional generals in the Mexican Army, he is an outspoken pacifist with an almost pathological aversion to bloodshed. Although he is an ardent socialist, his enthusiasm is for cooperative control of industry, rather than for any rigid plan. His statements concerning Russian communism are all critical and for the most part derogatory. He has the anarchist's fear of a strong state and the maverick's terror of anything that smacks of dictatorship. Accordingly, Mexico today presents the unusual spectacle of increasing social control in industry without genuine planning or central economic authority. The public enterprises of Mexico run the gamut from workers' control to peasant management and outright government administration. In between, there is a bewildering variety of mixed types of economic control in which workers, peasants,

consumers and government all play a part. Cárdenas' attitude is experimental rather than messianic.

The dramatic highlights of the period of the Cárdenas Revolution have been oil expropriation, the rupture of diplomatic relations with England and the crushing of the Cédillo rebellion. Its undercurrents have been less spectacular but far more important. Land has been given to the peasants; cooperative farms are replacing almost feudalistic estates; workers' control of industry is being spurred; the mentality of the people is being changed through a bold educational program. Oil expropriation was merely an incident in this revolution. The petroleum companies had become, in the Mexican mind, symbolic obstacles to a vaguely defined "economic emancipation." The Mexican government was swept forward on a tidal wave of anger against "imperialist exploitation." The symbols of obstruction, the oil companies, naturally fell. Oil expropriation was followed by further nationalization of the country's railroad mileage. Various lands and factories belonging to foreigners have been reorganized as cooperatives without indemnity to former owners. The colossal Mexican debt remains in a chronic condition of default. Thus the casualty list of

the Cárdenas upheaval has been economic. Equities have been liquidated, not human beings.

II

The main achievement of the Cárdenas government is the agrarian reform program. Seventy per cent of Mexico is peasant. The average Mexican is an inarticulate and ragged peon who cultivates a small patch of arid land with a wooden plow or fire-hardened stick. He earns less than 20 cents a day, and is ravaged by easily preventable diseases. His world consists of a cluster of primitive villages, untouched by industrialization and modern science. A truncated Catholicism and the leftovers of age-old Indian polytheisms constitute his spiritual fodder. On the theory that the land should belong to those who work it, Cárdenas carved out 36,000,000 acres of land and turned it over to 813,000 peasant families between 1934 and 1939. Absentee *hacendados*, feudal Mexican overlords, and foreign land speculators who traced their titles back to the reckless days of Porfirio Díaz suffered.

Cárdenas soon discovered that land distribution alone wouldn't end rural distress, as long as farming methods were slipshod and tradi-

tion-bound. Accordingly, the big monocultural areas (such as cotton, henequen, sugar, rice, wheat, and coffee) are being transformed into cooperative farms with control vested jointly in government land banks and elected peasant delegates. The government sends agronomists into the wilderness to teach illiterate peasants the mysteries of crop rotation and pest eradication. In the Laguna cotton zone, the tractor is replacing the mule and new storage dams are being rushed to completion to increase the vagrant flow of irrigation water from the Aguanaval and Nazas rivers. The Mexican land banks lend the peasants money, build hydroelectric stations, conduct research into mule diseases, and carry on the inevitable Cárdenas crusade against the saloon.

The scope of democracy within the collective farm varies with the competence and education of the peasants. In La Laguna, where the Mexican peon is rapidly learning how to prepare simple financial statements, grade lint cotton and run gins, the government land bank is fading out of the picture and an elected central peasant committee is taking over. In Yucatán, on the other hand, a self-complacent bureaucracy is mismanaging the vast cooperative henequen

zone at a terrible cost to 30,000 Mayan Indians.

It is impossible to present a final balance sheet of the agrarian reform, for the picture is still obscured by the turmoil of transition. A few figures indicate the trend, but all verdicts must be tentative. In 1938, the collectivized farms reported per acre yields 10 to 77 percent above the national average in the four main crops of the country. The crop failures of 1938, which careless observers attributed to collectivization, were succeeded by bumper harvests. In the newest and most carefully planned of the agrarian cooperatives — the Lombardía and Nueva Italia rice region — the peasants earned as much as ten pesos (about \$1.70) a day in the second half of 1939, according to the latest report of the Federal Land Bank. This compared with a wage of 1.40 pesos under private management. In addition, the 2000 members of the cooperative paid interest on their debt to the government and set aside 24,000 pesos for their social fund. In the Mexicali cotton cooperative, average earnings rose from 2.75 pesos under hacienda management to 8.75 pesos in 1939.

Despite these optimistic reports, the path of Mexican agrarian reform has been strewn with ineffi-

ciency and bad faith. The coffee expropriation in Chiapas was incompetently planned and will probably turn out badly. Local politicians often plunder the collectives.

III

In industry, there has been a parallel movement toward socialized forms of control. Labor has a large say in the management of the expropriated oil trust. The National Railways of Mexico have been placed under trade union control. While the railroad workers' union has eliminated unnecessary overhead charges, it has lacked the courage to reduce the wages of its members, and the discipline of the railway personnel has been undermined. Labor control of industry has invaded textiles, shoe manufacture, mining, the printing trades, the paper mills, sugar refineries, bus, railroad and air transportation, and a dozen other fields. Even such humble groups as the salt gatherers of the Pacific Coast, the fishermen of Guaymas and the chicle gatherers of the malarial Quintana Roo jungles are cooperatively organized. These worker-cooperatives generally comprise the débris of the competitive industrial system. Derelict plants go into bankruptcy or

refuse to pay absurdly low minimum wages. The courts solve the problem by turning the factories over to their workers. The result is that the bulk of the producer-cooperatives are dependent on government credit for existence.

This socialized sector of the Mexican economy accounts for perhaps 20 to 35 per cent of the nation's production. It is linked together by a series of government purchasing organizations, a federal warehouse system and an intricate apparatus to prevent profiteering in basic foodstuffs. The cooperative farms are branching out to form consumer cooperatives and socialized medicine projects.

The impetus to this vast, pacific reorganization comes from 22,000 rural schoolteachers scattered over the immensity of peasant Mexico. The views of these teachers are mostly socialist. Their manifold duties include organizing trade unions, stirring up peasants to demand land from the *hacendados*, forming cooperatives, replacing lethal sewage systems, and weaning the peasantry away from its disastrous reliance on maize crops. Under Cárdenas, the attempt to educate the peasantry in atheism, which resulted in the murder of several hundred schoolteachers by enraged peasants, has gone by the

board. Mexican politicians no longer win sinecures by attacking the priesthood.

The radical Mexican labor code is being conscientiously enforced for the first time in history. A few years ago, the Mexican Supreme Court calmly threw the traditional theory of a classless judiciary out of the window. Cárdenas shocked Monterrey business men in 1935 with the observation that Mexican law must consciously favor the weaker side in all economic conflicts. In terms of this philosophy, the President organizes peasant leagues and exhorts bickering trade union groups to unite in order to defend the interests of their class.

This is the Cárdenas revolution. What comes next depends not so much on the new president — both candidates are middle-of-the-roaders — as on outside factors. And the most decisive factor is what happens in the United States. The November election here will be as crucial to Mexico as her own. For Uncle Sam is able to bring overwhelming economic pressure to bear on any administration or policy. The fate of the Mexican revolution is haunted by ghosts — the ghosts of Madero, Huerta, and Pancho Villa testifying that Mexico's kingmakers sometimes live in the White House.

GLASS MAGIC

By J. D. RATCLIFF

NEGLIGIBLE twenty years ago, industrial research is our fastest-growing profession. This year, alert American manufacturers will spend \$180,000,000 in 1800 laboratories to discover new methods of making their products better and more abundant. In every great industry, research pioneers — mostly anonymous — are devising new twists for the recalcitrant stuffs of nature, extending the frontiers of use and beauty, lowering prices for the consumer, and creating more jobs for labor.

Tucked away in the rolling hills of upper New York is the Corning Glass Company. At Corning, the word "research" means two things: first, scientific investigation, in which men spend their lives ferreting out the basic secrets of glass; second, the practical engineering field, where these discoveries are geared to the needs of industry. In vast, rambling rooms, amid salt baths and hissing rotary molds, labor 175 scientists. There is singularly little regimentation in the Corning laboratories; to a con-

siderable degree, each man selects some problem that particularly fascinates him and concentrates on it.

Corning's scientists have made glass magnificently versatile. They have fused combinations of sand, soda, lime, borax, lead and other substances to produce over 25,000 variations of glass. They have made glass bolts and nuts, to be used where acids would eat iron. They have made dishes that will not break when filled with molten iron; drinking-glasses that bounce unharmed when dropped on tile floors. Corning has spun filaments so fine that a one-pound batch would stretch around the earth; and has poured the world's biggest chunk of glass — the twenty-ton, 200-inch reflector for the Mt. Palomar telescope.

The gigantic Corning plant itself at first glance resembles a corner of hell. Yet here the raw materials of glass are mixed by laboratory formulas more precise than any medical prescription, and fed into gas-fuelled furnaces. In a