EDUCATIONAL STUDIES
SERIES I NO.4

MEXICO'S SCHOOL FOR INDIANS.

An Experiment in Racial Psychology.

MEXICO CITY
JANUARY 1928

MEXICO'S SCHOOL FOR INDIANS--AN EXPERIMENT IN RACIAL PSYCHOLOGY.

Mexico is teaching Indians to laugh. I have seen an Indian laugh-- nay! even more, I have seen two hundred Indians all laughing together at the same time. I do not expect anyone to believe this. I would not believe it myself had I not seen it with my own eyes, for everyone knows that Indians are not supposed to laugh. The proper business for Indians in the United States is to wear feathers down their backs, engage in flat-footed war dances, shoot innocent Nordics, ride bareback horses in wild west shows, and live on reservations. In Mexico, Indians are beings who inhabit the "sierras" and make trouble for the government, or lazy, stupid creatures that work on "haciendas", or more romantically and more distantly, "our glorious forefathers who were betrayed and conquered by the unspeakable Spaniards." But in any case, whether he be in the United States or in Mexico, "lo! the poor Indian" is by tradition a solemn, stoical, even morose individual. Occasionally the novelists have allowed him a "crafty smile"-- but an honest, hearty, spontaneous guffaw? Well, for Indians and horses, it just isn't done. Now the interesting thing about all this is that for once popular tradition approximates the truth. Here in Mexico Indians don't laugh. They don't know how! Three centuries and more of virtual slavery; and generations on end of hunger, poverty, and neglect; life without hope and death without distinction-- this is enough to rob any people of the gift of laughter.

It does not appear in any of the manifestos or "plans", but in a very real sense it is true that the battles of Mexico's great revolution were fought to vindicate the right of the Indian to laugh. "If the Indians," said the revolutionary leaders, "have somehow lost this unique human capacity, if they no longer know the joy of life, then we will teach them again the meaning of laughter and all that it symbolizes. We will prove once and for all that the Indians are not inferior clods, but men like other men, a race possessing the same range of capacities and sharing the same fundamental human nature of all other races of mankind." During the course of his campaign for election to the office which he now holds, President Calles reiterated this doctrine of the "ideología revolucionaria": "While the reactionaries believe that the indigenous races of my nation are only a drag and a deterrent on the whites and the mestizos, I, on the contrary, am enamored of the indigenous races of Mexico and have faith in them."

The expression of such worthy sentiments as these is not altogether new in the history of Mexico. As a matter of fact, Mexico has been at the job of saving the Indians since the days of the conquest. But somehow nothing very much has ever happened; the Indian has remained still the Indian-- a being apart from the current of Mexican life and civilization. Now, however, a change is in the making. The spirit of San Bartolomé de las Casas, great and devoted "Defender of the Indians" in the sixteenth century, is again abroad in the land. The present government of Mexico is not content with simply expressing its faith in

the Indian. It has set about to prove its faith by its works. One of the most interesting of these works is "La Casa del Estudiante Indígena".

"The House (or School) of the Indigenous Student," inaugurated in Mexico City in 1925, is, to be sure, not devoted solely to renewing the risibilities of the indigenous population of Mexico; nor does this one school represent the only way in which the government of Mexico is redeeming the promises of the revolution to the Indian. Laughter is only a symbol, and the "Casa" is only one phase of what is in reality the beginning of a tremendous experiment in cultural assimilation.

The purpose of "La Casa del Estudiante Indígena" is given in one of its official publications as follows:

"1. To 'annul' the cultural distance which separates the Indian from the present epoch; to transform his mentality, attitudes, and customs and adapt them to modern civilized life; to incorporate the Indian as an integral part of the life of the nation.

"2. To initiate the 'drawing together', the spiritual fusion of the various autochthonous families or racial groups that populate the nation and to awaken and strengthen in the Indians a sense of their own value..

"3. Not to arouse racial antagonisms and feelings of racial exclusiveness... but to show the Indian the part which he must play in the formation of the national soul; to exalt the significance of the Indian culture and yet at the same time make

clear the mutual dependence and solidarity of all mankind."

A clearer idea of the objects of the "Casa" may be gained by considering the statement made to the author by the director of the school, Señor Don Enrique Corona.

"What we are trying to do," said Señor Corona, "is to create wants, to stimulate ambitions in a race that, having lost all but the simplest animal wants, no longer answers to the dynamic progressive force of desire...In a word, we are striving to raise the standard of living of a people whom the untoward events of history have reduced to the level of mere existence. Isolation has always meant ignorance and cultural decay and the case of the Indians shut away in the mountains of Mexico is no exception. By bringing these Indians from all over the country here to the capital, throwing them into contact with the 'criollos' (those of Spanish descent) and the 'mestizos' (mixed Indian and Spanish), letting them work, study, play, and-- yes-- struggle, suffer, and triumph-- thus it is that we hope to create the 'gran familia nacional'...Once these students have been incorporated into the national culture, once they share with their fellow Mexicans common aspirations and common ideals, then we plan to send them back to leaven the loaf in their native villages-- each one a teacher, a leader, and a prophet for his people."

Upon analysis these two statements of the objects and purposes of the "Casa del Estudiante Indígena" reduce to this: The School for Indians is an attempt to introduce selected representatives of the indigenous population to the technique of modern

civilization, to create in them a spirit of national unity, and to prepare them as agents to carry both technique and spirit back to their native villages.

The actual pedagogical prodedure through which the educational authorities are seeking to translate these hopes into realities reveals a program in which technical and social studies receive equal emphasis. Within the school proper the students receive instruction in the more elementary hygienic and aesthetic forms of "civilized" behavior. This includes such matters as learning to sleep in beds, eat at tables, take baths, wash their teeth, and wear shoes. Of a more strictly social nature are the activities in the clubs, cooperative societies, and on the athletic field. In these and other ways the teachers strive to break down the Indian reserve and aloofness and instill in the students a spirit of "reciprocity, sociability, and camaraderie."

In order to carry out in the most effective manner the plan of constantly "mixing" the Indians with the other racial elements in Mexico, the formal class room instruction is, in the main, carried on in cooperation with other schools. In this way the Indians are really attending, not one, but a half-dozen different schools. In the "Escuela Práctica de Industrias", for example, they receive instruction in the various "pequeñas industrias" (conservation of fruit and vegetables, tanning, carpentry, etc.); in the "Instituto Técnico" they are taught the elementary principles of mechanics, electricity, and "automovilismo". Supplementing the class room work, the process of assimilation is

also furthered by frequent visits to museums, libraries, historical and archaeological sites, by athletic competition with other schools, and by parties and "fiestas" in the "Casa" to which "outsiders" are invited.

Pari pasu with these efforts to introduce the students to the social and technological aspects of modern life go the activities devoted to "exalting the significance of the Indian's own culture." Tribal clubs are formed, the students are encouraged to practice and develop their native arts and crafts, to sing their native songs, and to preserve the memory of their tribal legends and history. Above all, they are encouraged to perfect their knowledge of their native dialects for therein lies the hope of taking back to their own people the things which they have learned in Spanish.

The physical equipment of the "Casa" compared with that of many other schools in Mexico is of an exceptionally high grade. The main building is large, well arranged, and affords ample room for the dormitories, class rooms, mess halls, a library, theater, and swimming pool. In the space around the building are athletic fields, gardens, chicken pens, and various out houses. Though the architecture is unpretentious, the long galleries which with their graceful arches encircle the wings of the building, the use of native decorative schemes, and, the spotless cleanliness of both grounds and buildings, gives the whole place an air of distinction and even beauty. The buildings plus the equipment represent an investment of about 350,000 pesos (c. $175,000.) At the present

time the school counts 200 students and 8 members on the faculty. The operating costs average 2 pesos a day per student, or about $6,000 a month. Of this expense the greater part is borne by the federal government. In a few cases, however, the state governments contribute half of the expenses of students coming from tribes within the state.

To enter the "Casa del Estudiante Indígena" a student must be between the ages of 12 and 17, a representative of a pure Indian group, and be able to speak his native Indian dialect. It is also preferred that the prospective student shall have completed at least two years of a rural school, although this is not required. The 200 students now enrolled in the school come from 21 different states of the Republic and represent families or sub-families of Indians speaking the following dialects: Amuzgo, Cajuar, Chontal, Huasteco, Huichol, Mexicano, Mayo, Maya, Mazahua, Mixteco, Otomí, Pame, Pápago, Popoloco, Quiche, Cachiquel, Tzoque, Tarahumara, Tlapaneco, Tarasco, Yaqui, and Zapoteco. (This list is inserted en toto by way of an exhibit of one of Mexico's greatest problems in education-- how to reach a diversity of peoples speaking a diversity of languages. Very few of the students can speak any Spanish when they enter the "Casa").

Those in charge of the "Casa del Estudiante Indígena" and others interested in the future of the Indians in Mexico are immensely enthusiastic about the work of the school. Already plans are being made to enlarge the plant to accomodate a thousand

students. New courses are to be added and the activities of the school expanded in every way possible. The friendly critic in seeking to evaluate the significance of the whole project finds it difficult to escape the contagion of this enthusiasm. Nor does one wish to escape it as far as some of the achievements are concerned. No elaborate psychological tests or series of mental measurements are needed to prove the success of the undertaking as an experiment in racial psychology. Even the most prejudiced observer will have to admit that, if the 200 students now enrolled in the school are a fair sample, the Indians of Mexico can with proper training display physical, intellectual, and artistic capacities equal to those of any other racial group. To see these Indians when they arrive at the school-- dirty, sullen, ignorant, little savages, and then to see them a year later-- clean, alert, laughing, and-- yes-- "civilized" youngsters-- is almost to witness a miracle. "Ya saben reir los muchachos" (now the boys know how to laugh). Indians are human beings!

However, granting that the "Casa" has successfully demonstrated the racial equality of the Indian (in so far as such things can be demonstrated), there still remain a number of other problems to be solved before the experiment can be declared an unqualified success. The first and most important of these problems relates to the "missionary aspect" of the program. Will these Indian students after three or four years spent in surroundings offering every convenience of modern life, and after being given every opportunity to develop a taste for the pleasures, excitements, and interests

of a large city, want to go back to the dreary monotony, the dirt, and the squalor of their native villages? In other words, are some of the critics right in holding that the "school is an Indian zoo and that its only result will be to fire a varied assortment of savages with am ambition to wear a silk hat and get a soft political job in Mexico City"? When I raised this point with the Director of the school he assured me that the faculty was doing everything in its power to combat this danger. On every possible occasion the students are reminded of the debt they owe to their own people and the responsibility which lies with them to pass on to their tribe the knowledge which they have acquired. Whether when the test comes this idealism will prove actually to have taken root remains to be seen. At least it is not without interest that one old Tarahumara chief proposed to take no chances with this sort of moral suasion. The story goes that when he was about to leave fifteen representatives of his tribe at the school, he addressed them in this wise: "Here you remain, my sons. When your studies are finished you will return to your native 'sierra' to teach your brothers. And rest assured, that if any one of you fails to return, another Tarahumara will come to seek you out and punish you with death."

Another question which presents itself is: Assuming that any or all of the students do go back to their native villages, just how effective will their efforts be to "teach their brothers"? Will not the very things which they have learned-- their new way of dressing, the new food they eat, the new language they speak,

the new habits and tastes they have acquired-- operate to isolate them from the people they wish to help? Cultural and social "distances" the sociologists have pointed out are just as real, just as formidable barriers to commmunication as mountains and rivers. The routine of existence, the way of life, in an Indian village, uncivilized though it may appear to the white man and the city dweller, nevertheless has all the power of age-old tradition behind it. Even natives will not be able to change or "uplift" this way of life if they come wearing too strange an air.

It may be that both of the questions which have been raised here are purely theoretical and will not appear later on in actual experience. However, for the present writer at least, they represent the two chief defects in the educational program of the "Casa del Estudiante Indígena". Interesting and heartening as have been the results achieved in the school so far, one wonders if the same results could not have been obtained with even greater success by establishing regional schools, away from the cities and in the very midst of the Indian groups themselves. In other words, why not follow the plan which is being so admirably worked out in the rural schools and bring the school to the Indian and not the Indian to the school?