

INTRODUCING THE MEXICAN INDIAN TO 1931

A former Secretary of Education in Mexico, Dr. Puig Casaurane, tells a story of how on one of his tours of inspection he stopped one day to visit the frontier town of Nogales in the State of Sonora.

"My eye was caught", relates Dr. Casaurane, "by a splendid building in the process of construction on a little hill in the poorest and most miserable section of the town. When I enquired about this building, I was informed it was a school being built by the City Council. Most of the actual labor, however, it later developed, was being done by the inhabitants of the little community around the school; for it was these poor people who carried the stones up the steep hill - working like peons, without pay or recompense of any sort. I immediately decided I must visit the school and talk to some of these volunteer workers. Among others, I met one old man almost seventy years of age. Don Isabel was his name, and he had come to Nogales from the State of Guanajuato. I started to compliment him for the work which he was doing for the school, but in the midst of my remarks, he stopped me and said: 'Señor, there is no reason for you to congratulate me; when I used to live in my 'pueblo' in Guanajuato, there also I carried many rocks and stones - but it was to build a church that I labored. Now I labor to build a school, for I have learned that when we Mexicans are obliged to cross the border into the United States

in search of work, they do not ask us if we know how to pray; they ask us if we can read'."

Often it is the Don Isabels who express more clearly than many a learned tome or column of statistics, the changes that are taking place in a country. And so it is in this case. Modern Mexico has put its faith in education. The Mexican nation is at the present time conducting an experiment in public education, unprecedented in the history of the country. Like old Don Isabel, Mexico is carrying rocks and stones up a hill to build a school.

The bill for public education in Mexico for the year 1930 was in round numbers 63,800,000 pesos. Of this amount, 40,100,000 pesos were spent by the Federal government and 23,700,000 pesos by the state and municipal governments. For the Federal government this meant that almost 12% of the National budget was devoted to education. The average percentage of the state and municipal budgets devoted to educational purposes was just under 36%. In other words, translating the figures into American dollars, Mexico is spending for public education at the present time approximately \$30,000,000 a year. With \$30,000,000, a respectable number of roads can be carried up a respectable number of hills. It is my intention in this lecture to describe briefly:

- (1) the nature of the "hill" which Mexico is trying to climb - i.e. the nature of the educational problem; and
- (2) what manner of "rocks" Mexico is building into the foundation and structure of its new educational system.

ILLITERACY

In the narrower sense, the problem of education in Mexico is a problem of illiteracy. The 1921 census gives the total population of Mexico as 14,334,730. Of this number, 6,879,348 or 65.27% of the population above 10 years of age cannot read or write. In several states the percentage of illiteracy of the population above 10 years of age rises as high as 80%, and even in the Federal District the percentage is 24.09%. To put the matter the other way round, out of a total population of 10,538,621 above 10 years of age, only 3,564,767, or a little over one-third, are known to be able to read and write.

Undoubtedly, when the figures of the 1930 census are available they will show some decrease in the percentage of illiteracy. Taking the figures as they stand, however, it would be difficult to imagine from the point of view of our modern standards in such matters, a worse state of affairs than these statistics disclose. But even figures, such as these, cannot give a true understanding of the real educational problem with which the Mexican government is faced. As a matter of fact, in any predominantly agricultural country the inability of a large per cent of the population to read and write might not be so important as it appears at first blush. The chief reason why the high percentage of illiteracy in Mexico at the present time is a matter of serious moment is that this percentage happens to be not only an index of the ability of the people to read and write, but, what is vastly more significant, an index of the standard of living of an overwhelming majority of the population.

STANDARD
OF LIVING

In other words, the fact that 65% of the people of Mexico cannot read and write also corresponds with the fact that at least 65% (and probably more) of the population is living at a level where the most strenuous efforts barely suffice to keep body and soul together. And although it is not to be denied that political, economic and historical factors are partly responsible for this unfortunate condition, the modern educational leaders of Mexico are firmly convinced that at the root of the evil lies the ignorance of the people. That the people cannot read and write is a minor matter compared with the fact that the majority of Mexico's rural population (and at least three-fourths of the people are rural) is ignorant of all but the most primitive agricultural techniques; that the people are without knowledge of how to care for their physical well-being and innocent of hygiene; that they do not know how to use the natural resources lying at their very door-steps; and that their homes, their clothes, their food are still of the crudest and most primitive type.

PUEBLA

Lest it appear that this statement is only the reaction of a foreigner, let me quote from a report recently published by the former Sub-Secretary of Education, Señor Moisés Sáenz, after an official tour through the mountainous regions of the State of Puebla.

"The climate of this region is varied...the rainfall very generous and the land, if well cultivated, of enormous fertility. The people are hard working...men, women, and children toiling like ants from sun to

sun. And yet, despite the fact that nature has been prodigious in its gifts...that the land is well distributed amongst the population, that they have peace and for some time past have had a benevolent government - still the standard of living of these people is of the very lowest type.... Using the methods of the neolithic age, the Indians work their lands and gather its fruits. On the market day of the nearest "pueblcito" ('nearest' oftentimes means a whole day's walk) the men, the women, and even the poor little children come carrying on their shoulders the meager harvest... As did their fathers and their grandfathers and all their ancestors, so also do they; thus do they sow and reap, thus bargain and sell..."

"For the most part, they know of no other way to renew the fertility of their lands than to allow them periodically to rest. The year in which the land lies fallow, the family simply suffers more hunger. In one place, Zapotitlan, there was a man who cultivated his land very well...This man wished to teach the Indians his secret. They listened to him with their usual apathy, but when the harvest came and they witnessed again the miracle of the greater yield, they asked to what saint he prayed in order to obtain such an abundant harvest and to what priest he said his masses."

In order to get the full significance of this quotation, it must be remembered that its author is not describing conditions in the State of Chiapas or Oaxaca or any other region far removed from the center of activity and as yet rela-

tively undeveloped. On the contrary, the State of Puebla is one of the richest of the central plateau region and as well equipped with means of communication as any other state in the Republic. The conditions which characterize the life of the inhabitants of the "sierras" of Puebla are not the exception in Mexico, but the rule. Since this is true, the problem of education in Mexico is a social problem in the widest meaning of the term. The people need to be taught to read and write, but, more than this, they need to be shown a way of life. Litteracy is only the first step; reading and writing only a means to achieving the higher end of raising the standard of living and "incorporating the masses of the people in the civilized life of the nation".

CULTURAL ETEROGENEITY

If the question which confronts the educational leaders of Mexico is, from one point of view, a matter of how the school can best aid the economic and material rehabilitation of the people, from another point of view, quite as important for the future of Mexico, it is a question of what part the school can play in creating a spirit of national unity and cultural homogeneity in a country where as yet these things are aspirations rather than accomplished facts. Mexico, in the words of a former Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos, is a land of contrasts and differences. "Mexico's most striking feature is the extreme difference in the appearance of the inhabitants, the nature of the soil, in the climate of nearby sections, abysmal differences in the thought of the people and in the landscape of the country. Perhaps

there is no nation on earth where you can find in the same accentuated form a coexistence of human types separated by centuries and even epochs of ethnographical development - people different in blood, race, tradition and habits."

GEOGRAPHY

Geographically, racially, and culturally, Mexico is not one, but a half dozen different countries. In the south and in a relatively narrow strip along both coasts are the "tierras calientes", with the excessive heat and torrential rains of the tropics. Rising gradually from the great Sonora desert in the north and attaining an elevation of 7,500 feet in the Valley of Mexico, is the great central plateau. The climate of this region varies from cool to very cold and, although for the most part semi-arid conditions prevail, when the land is properly irrigated, due to the great elevation, almost any product of the temperate and north temperate zone can be raised. Between the Great Central Plateau and either coast can be found on the slopes and in the valleys of the two mountain ranges which traverse Mexico from north to south, almost any climate which may be desired. In the fourteen hour trip, for example, between Mexico City and Vera Cruz, you pass through as many varieties of climate as if you journeyed in the United States from Estes Park, Colorado, to Palm Beach, Florida.

RACE

Ethnologically, present day Mexico presents as heterogeneous a picture as it does geographically. Conventionally, Mexican population is divided into three classes: whites, Indians, and "mestizos" (i.e. the results of crosses between

the indigenous groups and the whites). Of the total population of some 14,300,000 given in the 1921 census:

1,400,000 or about 10% were classified as white,
8,500,000 or a little less than 59% were mestizo, and
4,200,000 or 29% were pure Indian.

These statistics can, of course, be only approximately correct; but at least they serve to indicate the larger outlines of the racial composition of the population. When one stops to consider that no one of the three major classes indicated represents a "pure" or homogenous racial stock, the picture becomes even more complex. The term "whites", for example, refers in the main, of course, to the Spanish conquerors and their descendants. But the Spanish, it must be remembered, are a hybridization of all the racial stocks of Europe plus whatever is represented ethnologically by the historical terms "Moors" and "Jews". On the other hand, what the Census lists as "pure indigenous" population, is made up of at least three widely different types of Indians, in turn divided into an undetermined number (probably fifty or more) sub-types. The mestizos are anything than cannot be put into one of the other two classes.

CULTURE

Considered in relation to the problem of education, the geographical and racial diversity which characterizes Mexico would not necessarily appear as a significant factor, were it not also true that levels and varieties of cultural development can be correlated with these geographical and biological differences. Without entering into the moot ques-

tions of geographical or racial determinism, one may simply state that there is in Mexico at the present time an almost one to one correspondence between cultural diversity and environmental and biological diversity.

For convenience, one may speak, for example, of the indigenous (Indian) population of Mexico as a single "race"; but one must be careful not to imply thereby a cultural unity which in reality does not exist. This "single race" includes over 49 well distinguished ethnical groups, speaking between 50 and 100 different and distinct languages or dialects, and exhibiting markedly different customs and habits of life. After four hundred years and more of domination by Spanish culture, there are still in Mexico some 2,000,000 Indians who cannot even speak the Spanish language. The cumulative effects of social isolation in a mountainous country without adequate means of communication plus the different types of adjustment called forth by the many varieties of geographical environment, have inevitably given rise to cultural differentiations which to this day characterize Mexico.

Another basis for estimating the extent of these "abysmal differences in thought" and levels of cultural development, may be gained by considering the following division of the population into "types of civilization" recently published by the Secretariat of Education:

Primitive or Indigenous Civilization

Indians	3,500,000
Mestizos	4,300,000

Intermediate Civilization

Including a small percentage of Indians... 4,000,000

European or Modern Civilization

Including a large percentage of Mestizos.. 1,500,000

Until more complete studies have been made, these figures may be accepted as a fairly adequate representation of the "cultural map" of Mexico.

With this brief survey before us, we are now in a position to understand why the problem of education in present day Mexico is not only one of how to improve the economic well-being of the people, but also a problem of how the schools may be used for the "integration of the nation". The unity of human groups depends upon their possession of a common background of experience and tradition and their reaction to communally held symbols and collective representations. If Mexico is not a nation, it is because the symbols of nationhood do not yet possess any meaning or significance for the vast majority of the population. The flag, the national anthem, the national heroes have not entered into the experience of the people. "The historical tradition, which imposes uniformity on the customs and aspirations of a people", writes the Mexican sociologist, Daniel Cosío Villegas, "properly speaking, does not exist in Mexico...There are no popular legends, no popular heroes...Even our great bull-fighters and our great bandits, heroes of the middle class, are known only to those few individuals who read the daily newspapers." The "gran familia nacional" is yet to be achieved in Mexico; the responsibility for its creation lies with the public schools.

SOLUTIONS

Turning now from our consideration of the nature of the educational problem, let us review in summary fashion the means which have been devised for its solution. Specifically, let us see what kind of schools are being established, and what type of pedagogical procedure is being followed. In a word: what is Mexico doing in its schools to raise the standard of living of the masses of the people and to create a spirit of national unity and cultural homogeneity?

SCHOOL
SYSTEM

Before undertaking to answer these questions, it is necessary to state that in Mexico, public education is carried on by the federal, state and municipal governments. As a matter of fact, however, at the present time, with the exception of a few of the larger cities, municipal schools are of little importance. Each state is autonomous in regard to its educational system and may develop its program from the kindergarten to the university. The Federal government has charge of the schools in the Federal District and in the Territories and also has the right to establish schools in any state. This means that the Federal school system, working under the direction of the Secretariat of Education functions independently of the state school system. Duplication of effort is avoided by a careful co-ordination of the federal and state programs.

Since what John Dewey has called "Mexico's educational renaissance" has been undoubtedly very largely due to the work of the national authorities, it is appropriate that we should devote our attention mainly to the achievements of

the Federal government in this field.

RURAL SCHOOLS

The educational efforts of the national government in the country at large outside of the federal district and the territories, dates from ^{the} year 1921. At this time Mexico faced an educational crisis. The thirty years dictatorship of Díaz was, to put it mildly, not distinguished for achievements in education, and during the years of revolution and social disorder following the downfall of that regime, the whole system had become completely disorganized. Almost an entire generation had grown up without the advantages of public schools. In the larger cities, schools continued to operate after a fashion, but in the vast rural districts of Mexico, where 75% of the population lives and has its being, hardly a school was to be found. In the face of this situation, the federal government very wisely decided to direct its first efforts to establishing educational centers in these neglected rural communities. Beginning with the Obregon administration in 1921, this work has proceeded rapidly. In September 1931, the Secretary of Education was able to report that 6,401 federal rural schools had been established, with a total enrollment of 458,569 students, and 7,454 teachers. For the Department of Rural Schools alone, the budgeted expenditures of the national government in the year 1931 were over 9,000,000 pesos.

The program which is being followed in these federal rural schools is admirably adapted to the educational needs of the agrarian communities. Departing from the traditional three

"R's", the authorities have placed the emphasis in the four year course upon teaching the children (and through them their parents) those things which will serve immediately to increase productivity and raise the standard of living. Accordingly, each school is equipped with a small plot of ground. Courses in farming, gardening, the care of chickens and rabbits, and courses in weaving, tanning, pottery making, the preservation of fruits and vegetables, and carpentry bulk quite as large in the curriculum as reading, writing and arithmetic. Night classes are held for adults and every effort is put forth to make the school the center of the community life.

In all the activities of the rural school, the principle of "acción" is in force. This means that the students are encouraged to "learn by doing" rather than relying, as in the past, upon books and the words of the teacher for the sources of their knowledge. No opportunity is neglected to propagate the spirit of nationalism and group unity. The Indians are being taught to speak Spanish, and the national anthem may be heard in little mountain villages where, before the coming of the school, it is doubtful if even the meaning of the word "Mexico" was known. The states are following in the foot-steps of the federal government and the last census reports the existence of over 5,000 state supported rural schools.

NORMAL SCHOOLS

In order to train teachers for the rural schools, besides establishing a series of regional normal schools (there are 20 of these now with a total enrollment of 2,972 students),

the federal government has devised a most ingenious system of movable teachers' institutes, known as "Cultural Missions". These so-called "Cultural Missions" consist of a group of experts in education, agriculture, social work, small industries (weaving, carpentry, etc.) and physical culture. Fourteen such groups are now at work in the various states of the Republic. A Mission remains in a given community for three weeks. During this time, the rural teachers of that district receive intensive training in the theory and practice of rural education. During 1930, for example, some 85 of these rural teachers' institutes were held in 19 different states. The total budget in 1930 for Cultural Missions, including two so-called Permanent Missions or rural social service centers which have been established in the states of Hidalgo and Michoacán, was over 500,000 pesos.

AGRICULTURAL SCHOOLS

A more specialized and advanced type of education is being offered in the new federal regional agricultural schools. At the present time there are eight of these Escuelas Centrales Agrícolas located in as many states. The average total costs of these schools is estimated at about 1,000,000 pesos each. At the end of last year the enrollment in all schools averaged about 125 students per school. These institutions are open to the sons of small farmers or ejiditarios (i.e. those who live in the villages where the land is held communally). Briefly, their purpose is to furnish a means whereby the children of the peons and small landholders can be developed into intelligent, self-respecting and competent farmers. Each school has a large tract of land, is stocked with high-grade animals

and equipped with modern farming and dairying machinery. The agricultural schools, next to the rural schools, represent the most important educational innovation of the post-revolutionary regime in Mexico.

INDIAN SCHOOL

One other very interesting experiment which the national government is conducting in its general campaign to improve the conditions of the agrarian communities deserves to be mentioned. In 1925 there was inaugurated in Mexico City a school known as "La Casa del Estudiante Indígena" or "School for the Indigenous Student". This institution admits only "pure" Indians and has as its avowed purpose "the incorporation of the Indian as an integral part of the life of the nation." At the present time there are enrolled some 218 Indian students, representing 21 states and 25 or more different tribal groups. As an experiment in racial psychology the institution has already proved a marked success, for it has shown once for all that the Mexican Indian is not only equal in capacity to other racial groups, but that he possesses many virtues and gifts of unique value. The school hopes, by sending its graduates back "to leaven the loaf" in their native village, to become, in time, a great social force for reclaiming the Indians for Mexican national life.

It must not be concluded from the facts which I have presented that Mexico's educational reawakening has been entirely in the interest of the rural districts. Both inside and outside the federal district, the Department of Education has carried on an intensive campaign for the improvement of the city schools. Part of this campaign has been to estab-

lish "Escuelas Típicas" or model primary schools in the capital of each state. Also, the government maintains some 30 industrial and commercial schools in various cities of the Republic. In the federal Capital, the institutions of higher learning - the National University and the Preparatory Schools - have been reorganized along more modern and more democratic lines, and in the field of primary education the 9 new "Escuelas al Aire Libre" (Open Air Schools) represent a most original and novel contribution to school architecture and pedagogical practice. If time permitted, it would be interesting to treat in detail these and other aspects of the work of the Department of Education. This brief survey, however, is perhaps enough to reveal the major tendencies of the modern Mexican educational movement.

By way of summary and balancing the books on the present status of Mexican education the following facts may be passed in review:

CREDITS

(1) The Federal government is spending almost 12% of its total budget or around 40,100,000 pesos a year on education.

(2) The state and municipal governments are spending on an average 36% of their budgets or about 27,700,000 pesos a year for the same purpose.

(3) In all, almost 64,000,000 pesos per year are now being spent for public education in Mexico.

(4) The state and municipal governments are maintaining

9,338 schools of which 4,574 are rural and 4,567 primary.

(5) The Federal government at the present time is maintaining 7,305 schools of which 6,401 are rural schools.

(6) The total number of schools, public and private in Mexico is 19,792.

(7) The total enrollment in all schools is something over 1,762,000 students of which 1,600,000 are in public schools.

DEBITS

(1) At least 65% of the population of Mexico above 10 years of age (i.e. something under 7,000,000) cannot read or write.

(2) Of the total population of primary school age in Mexico (i.e. between 6 and 14 years) approximately only 1,700,000 or about 55% are in school. The remaining 1,400,000 children because of the lack of schools, the ignorance of their parents, economic necessity etc. are growing up without the benefit of education.

(3) Some Mexican authorities claim that at least half of the rural and primary schools in Mexico, specifically those supported by the state governments, are so bad as to be worse than useless. These schools are said to have no equipment and the teachers are "miserable beings" receiving salaries of from 18 centavos to 1 peso a day.

(4) Somewhere between two and three million Indians cannot speak the language common to the country.

(5) Nearly 8,000,000 people in Mexico are classified by the Ministry of Education as having a "primitive" standard of

living.

Undoubtedly Mexico is making headway in her struggle with the forces of darkness. To have increased the total number of public schools from 11,800 to 16,600 and to have raised the total government expenditures for education from 33,000,000 to almost 64,000,000 pesos per year as Mexico has done in the last five years, is no mean achievement. But the problem still remains one of staggering proportions. Not only must the nation struggle with ignorance and nescience on every side, but in education, as in every other public enterprise in Mexico, war has to be constantly waged against the age-old traditions of political graft and incompetence. There is an ever-present temptation to sacrifice the funds, so badly needed for education, to other and less worthy objects.

Moreover, what for convenience we have called here the "problem of education in Mexico" is only one aspect of that much larger and more difficult job which the revolutionary governments have tackled - the social reconstruction of the whole nation. It would be naive and even foolish to hope that in any educational program, of whatever kind, Mexico will find the solution of all the social ills to which it is heir. But if the present activities of the state and federal governments are an earnest for the future, it is clear that Mexico is determined to give education a fair chance to do its part in creating the new nation. The rest lies in the lap of the gods. "It must be recognized and said very loud and very clear", wrote the Secretary of Education in 1924, "that the work of

popular redemption is now securely launched, and that it has its roots deep in the conscience and heart of Mexico". If this was true in 1924, it is doubly true in 1931. Mexico has put its faith in education!