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NEW KNOWLEDGE FROM ABROAD

A Letter from James G. Maddox

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Imported knowledge has made important contributions to Mexico's political, social and economic growth. Although there is no way of measuring these contributions and comparing them objectively to other factors that rank as important stimuli to the country's development, it seems safe to conclude that among all of the various foreign influences that have figured significantly in the country's growth and development, imported knowledge ranks at the top of the list. For instance, ideas from abroad have surely been more important than foreign capital, which often is viewed as the prime prerequisite for stimulating the growth of underdeveloped economies.

The flow of knowledge across international boundaries is, of course, not a new development. Since Mexico became an independent country 135 years ago, it has rarely, if ever, thrown up barriers to the international exchange of ideas. Although Mexico has had a full share of dictators and much experience with highly centralized government, which from time to time has certainly been at variance with democratic ideals, and even though Mexico has not always honored the generally accepted rules of international intercourse, the country has never fallen prey to the type of leadership which wanted to cut the country off completely from the major value-concepts of Western culture. Generally, Mexico has welcomed new ideas from abroad, and for generations has sent thousands of its sons and daughters to Europe and in more recent years to the United States to study and learn from its more advanced neighbors.

However, for many decades after September 1821, when independence was gained from Spain, Mexico's social organization was such that the impact of ideas from abroad was quite limited. Only in the political arena did foreign thinking have much influence in Mexico during its first half-century as an independent country, and even here foreign knowledge provided guideposts mainly for the form of government, rather than for the content of political behavior. The ideas of the French radicals, of Tom Paine and of Thomas Jefferson provided a good share of the philosophic undergirding of the Mexican movement for independence. The influence of the constitution of the United States can be readily seen in the form of organization of the Mexican government. Nevertheless, the growth of the basic tenets of democratic procedures was slow, and even today they are far from being fully developed. Yet, during its first century as

an independent country, foreign political ideas probably had more influence on Mexico's development than did other types of knowledge from abroad.

Since the 1910 Revolution, however, and particularly during the past quarter-century, there has been a constant importation of technical knowledge--ideas, methods and techniques--that emanate from the laboratories and experiment stations of the scientists; the knowledge gained from the application of scientific research methods to the problems of factories, farms and mines in the more advanced nations of the West, appears to be the type of foreign knowledge that is most influential in Mexico. There is also a steady inflow of knowledge from the social science fields, particularly of the type which pertains to the administration and management of private business firms.

In general, it appears that the imported knowledge of recent years influences the form and functioning of the economic system in a more direct manner than it does the social and political processes of the country. However, its indirect impact in some of these areas may be quite significant. There is little doubt that in Mexico's search for ways and means of rapidly developing its economy, considerable stress has been laid, by both public and private agencies, on importing foreign knowledge and on adapting the ideas developed in other countries to the particular needs of the Mexican environment.

Among the many different avenues by which technical knowledge is imported into Mexico, the following six are among the most important:

1. Study abroad by Mexican students, intellectuals and businessmen.
2. The activities of foreign business firms, mainly those of the United States, Canada and Western Europe.
3. The publicly financed programs of technical assistance of the various agencies of the United Nations, the United States Government, and the Organization of American States.
4. The annual trek of thousands of Mexican laborers to the United States for jobs in agriculture and related occupations.
5. The work of privately financed philanthropic organizations, mainly from the United States.
6. The activities of religious agencies from the United States and a few other countries.

There are, of course, numerous other ways by which technical knowledge is coming into Mexico from outside sources. Among these are such things as: the reading of foreign books, magazines and

technical journals on the part of countless Mexicans; correspondence courses of various types, principally from schools headquartered in the United States; ideas brought by immigrants from abroad; an extraordinarily large number of international conferences on a wide range of subjects that are held in Mexico; and short-term seminars and discussion groups that bring highly trained specialists from the United States and Western Europe as well as a few other countries.

In subsequent letters and reports I expect to examine in some detail the operations of the publicly financed programs of technical assistance, and perhaps one or two of the other avenues by which technical knowledge is coming into Mexico. In this introductory letter, however, it is worth noting that the formally organized programs of technical assistance of the United Nations agencies and of the United States Government, though significant as examples of the way in which governments are encouraging the international exchange of knowledge, are by no means the only avenues by which important new ideas are flowing into Mexico. There is no way to arrive at a precise judgement as to the relative importance of the various sources of technical knowledge now being made available to the 30 million people of Mexico. However, I strongly suspect that study abroad by Mexican intellectuals and the activities of foreign business firms rank at the top of the list. These two influences have been important for many years; they are large in scope; and they have indirect influences that affect numerous facets of Mexican society.

The movement of 400,000 to 500,000 braceros (common laborers) across the border each year to work on farms, roads and railroads in the United States is obviously a very wide avenue by which new ideas may be entering Mexico, but the available evidence as to its importance is meager and by no means conclusive. It is clear that many of the braceros, though by no means all of them, return to Mexico after one or two summers of work in the United States with sufficient savings to start small businesses or become farm owners. Apparently, however, most of them return without having been influenced greatly in a cultural or educational sense. Professor Oscar Lewis of the University of Illinois, who with a group of graduate students is continuing his detailed social and anthropological studies in the village of Tepoztlán this summer, tells me that he has been surprised at the little influence which working in the United States appears to have had on the ex-braceros of Tepoztlán. I have observed in a few of the Tarascan villages in the Lake Patzcuaro area, some 250 miles west of Mexico City, that many of the small farmers who have been to the States as braceros continue to live and work as they have done for decades. Yet, many large farmers like to employ ex-braceros because they say, "these fellows learned to work in the United States," and it is certainly true that some of them had their first experience with modern farm machinery only because they went across the border as common laborers. Moreover, it seems clear that a significant proportion of the braceros take city jobs after their return instead of going back to their rural villages, most of which are the most tradition-bound, sedentary institutions in Mexico.

The immediate impact of the bracero movement, whatever its significance may be as a conveyor of new technical knowledge to Mexico, along with much of the impact of foreign business firms, is mainly on the lower classes of society. Many foreign business firms have "on-the-job" training courses for their laborers, and some of them provide technical assistance to the small shops and factories from which the foreign firms buy fully fabricated merchandise or components for the manufacture of radios, refrigerators, stoves, television sets and similar consumers' goods. These kinds of activities which enhance the skills and knowledge of the lower classes in society are in contrast to the traditional procedures of sending the sons of wealthy families abroad to study. It is probable that most of the Mexicans who go abroad for university training still come from upper and upper-middle class families, but some of the scholarship programs, particularly those of the technical assistance agencies of the U.S. Government, are reaching into the ranks of labor union leaders and foremen and managers of small industrial plants. Even in the highly technical work of the Rockefeller Foundation, the most important private philanthropic agency bringing new technical knowledge to Mexico, one can see important contributions to the productivity of small farmers. This agency has centered its attention largely on plant breeding, and has been highly successful in developing improved varieties and hybrids of corn and wheat, the seed of which is now being distributed widely to all classes of agricultural producers. Moreover, a significant part of the technical assistance programs of the United Nations and of the U.S. Government are made up of projects which have an immediate bearing on the levels of living of lower class Mexicans.

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