

EJIDATARIO AND BRACERO: THE TROUBLESOME RELATION  
BETWEEN LAND AND MOBILITY IN MEXICO (1940s-1950s)

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the role of the land reform and labour recruitment systems in governing farmworkers mobility and immobilisation, in particular the practices of mobility of Mexican peasants in the aftermath of the agrarian reform, and during the guest workers program between Mexico and the United States (1942-1964). Under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), agrarian reform, expropriation of large land estates and its redistribution in cooperative and collective holdings (*ejido*) constituted an important trajectory of peasantries' transformation and set off an era of prosperity until the 1960s. In this context, farmworkers' transnational mobility was the outcome of different strategies that shaped the relation between land possession and labour mobility. Through the use of sources collected in the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City, the essay investigates the relation between peasant's mobility and forms of land possession by: describing the forms of land possession and their juridical framework after the agrarian reform; focusing on the management of Mexican workers' mobility; assessing the desires and practices of mobility of *ejidatario* and other peasants that interacted with the politics of immobilisation within Mexico.

**Keywords:** Labor, Mobility, Land, Guest-workers, Agrarian reform.  
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## INTRODUCTION

Peasants have been largely deemed as the static workers *par excellence*; bonded to land under various labour forms and juridical frameworks, they largely became mobile as dispossessed farmworkers that the industrial revolution had violently ‘proletarianized’. Once peasants leave the land, even if temporarily, they are usually classified only as workers and are not considered peasants or farmworkers anymore. This is the recurrent narration that has proliferated within rural and peasant studies: it privileges the changes that occurred in the mobility from rural to urban contexts, and from agriculture to industrial economic sectors that turned peasants into workers.<sup>1</sup> This narrative effectively grasped the major changes that occurred at the macro level from the 1870s until the 1970s, when the commodification of land, nature and labour recast the global countryside (Vanhaute 2021: 92-111).

Still the nexus land-mobility is unclear whereas we give ground to the understanding of peasants as static subjects or proletarian workers. In the fields of peasant and rural studies, there is a revived enthusiasm in investigating the correlation between land ownership and migration (VanWey 2005), and a renewed attention to local comparative studies about migration and land use (Garni 2013). Most recent rural studies investigate population change and flows of population into or from rural spaces, and emphasises the need for repopulating this field because of the scarcity of research on the link between land and mobility (Milbourne 2007). In fact, this topic has been investigated by very few studies that are dated and are still largely focused on the issue of proletarianization (Guzmán and Rubén 1963; Arizpe 1985). When peasant studies deal with the issue of migration, they tend to consider the latter as an effect of low-wage economies and poverty (the ‘push-pull’ relation that leads to de-peasantization and rural exodus), of urbanization and the industrialization process (Arizpe 1978). Recent sociological investigations into the link between migration chains and intensive agriculture are limited to the present day (Lara Flores 2011; Robson, Klooster and Worthen 2018).

The interdependence of agricultural production and migration between Mexico and the United States is focused on atomized regional areas (Palerm and Urquiola 1993), on the labour recruitment programs of workers such as the so called “Programa Bracero” (Córdoba Ramírez 2013; Gri-

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<sup>1</sup> The major exception to this approach is Eric Vanhaute’s work that is strongly focused on peasants and peasantries within the framework of commodity frontiers, see VANHAUTE 2021.

jalva and Arriaga Martínez 2015), and the forms of labour intermediation of specific ethnic groups (Sánchez Gómez and Barceló Quintal 2017) or regions (Córdoba Ramírez 2017). Research about peasants' mobility is just related to the last agrarian reform in Mexico and its effects in the 1990s and 2000s (Stephen 1994; León Andrade *et al.* 2014). Scholarship on peasants and peasantries has extensively analysed the outcomes of the revolutionary agrarian reform in Mexico through a long-term perspective introduced by a well-established historiography and a strong regional focus (Otero 1989; Gledhill 1991; Roseberry 1993; Warman 2001), but without addressing the issue of mobility.

Moving from this state of research, this paper aims to detect the historical trajectory of both the mobility from land, and the immobilisation to land, by analysing the role of peasants' practices in Mexico between the 1940s and 1950s when one of the most disruptive agrarian reforms in world history had assigned land to peasants as the outcome of the revolution. The essay investigates the relation between peasant's mobility and forms of land possession by, in the first place, describing the forms of land possession and their juridical framework after the Agrarian reform, secondly, focusing on the management of Mexican workers' mobility, and finally, assessing the desires and practices of mobility of *ejidatario* and other peasants that interacted with the politics of immobilisation within Mexico. Primary sources from the Archivo General de la Nación of Mexico City will serve to disclose and question the practices of mobility that were both adopted by peasants as addressed to Mexican peasantries and the agrarian movement. This study adopts the point of view of Mexico and its social dimension to analyse the mobility to the USA and, more importantly, it investigates the coexistence of mobility and immobility within the same spatial and economic context.

## 1. LAND POSSESSION AND THE AGRARIAN REFORM

Since the revolution, Mexico witnessed various attempts to change both the relation between land and peasants as well as the rigid rural power structure based on the *latifundio* and the *hacienda* system that characterized the era of *porfiriato*.<sup>2</sup> Between 1898 and 1911, real salaries decreased by 25

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<sup>2</sup> *Porfiriato* is the common term used to indicate the authoritarian regime of general Porfirio Díaz who ruled Mexico from 1876 till 1911. In 1910, John Kenneth Turner wrote a pivotal study about the working conditions and enslavement of Mexicans during the regime (TURNER 2010). The *latifundio* is a large landed estate organised through the *hacienda*, that is a large estate whose legal status rested on private property in the soil and subsoil.

per cent and the mortality rate increased from 31 to 33.2 per cent (Hansen 1971: 32) while the 1 per cent of the population owned the 97 per cent of land (Eckstein 1966: 25) and the agricultural production lowered so much that it recovered only after 1925 (Hansen 1971: 43). The revolution that spread across the country in 1911 was animated by many factions and political groups with variegated aims, but with the common objective to wrest power from the oligarchy of *porfiriato* and change the social structure.

The Mexican Constitution of 1917 established two rights that are the pillar of the reborn Nation state and the outcome of a bloody revolution. The Constitution declared all land to be owned by the nation that, in turn, had the right to transmit it to individuals and “had the obligation to expropriate any private property when the land was deemed necessary for ‘public use’” (Otero 1989: 281). Article 27 established the nation’s property of all resources and the nation’s right to impose restrictions on private property, so that the state becomes the authority entitled to manage the underground and above ground resources, and to regulate the nation’s possession. In this regard, the nation is the *owner* of all land, and the people are its *holder*. The concentration of vast land estates in few hands violated the right of people to hold national land. The expropriation of large land estates – the *latifundio* – was enacted through the agrarian reform that parcelled out large estates and distributed them to peasants (Warman 2001). Each states’ government of the Mexican federation created specific agrarian commissions to regulate the whole process according to the Agrarian Law (Código Agrario), and guaranteed that the rural family holdings were unalienable and could not be plundered or undermined in any way (Hewitt de Alcantara 1977). In brief, the rural household was the recipient of the land – the holder – entitled to its use and production.

Then, article 123 of the Constitution aimed to guarantee the minimum life condition to workers through a minimum wage that should have satisfied the elemental needs based on regional differences. The revolutionary premise of the agrarian reform was to provide peasants with an adequate livelihood and redistribute land, but the process was not smooth and forms of land possession mirrored this troublesome process. At first, the state’s efforts aimed at integrating entrepreneurs and *hacendado* into the new power structure ended in strengthening the individual upward social mobility, and invested into the administrative structure of the state (Wilkie 1967). In fact, most political leaders of the revolution did not want to destroy the *hacienda* system, but intended to give a small plot of land to rebel peasants for their subsistence while still keeping them tied to the *hacienda* and peonage system. This view *identified peasants as individuals to be immobilised* within the same productive structure and exclusively recognized by their right to self-subsistence. For many politicians, the agrarian

reform and the “right to the land” was a basic compensation for the interruption of social conflict.

The state favoured those peasants who were able to buy the land of *hacienda* exceeding the maximum land size allowed, so as to improve the numbers of peasants who were owners of the worked land. The Colonization Law of 1923 established that land could be bought, and it ratified the maximum land size per land type and commodity. It was the beginning of the *minifundio* that sided the most well known *latifundio* (Hewitt de Alcantara 1977). In 1930, 35 per cent of the land in Mexico was still based on the *latifundio*, and only 4 per cent of the total land available had been distributed to peasants (Liendo Vera 1995). Until 1934, the conversion of *hacienda* into collective possession of land is not a national phenomenon or a given process, but it implied a sort of charitable deed and politicians’ support.

The radical agrarian reform introduced by Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) was an answer both to the unfulfilled revolutionary project as well as to the violent strikes of rural workers against landowners. As the reform finally got its wings, Cárdenas distributed 17,891,577 hectares to 814,537 peasants (Gutelman 1974). “Although Cárdenas obliged the large-acreage ex-owners to transform themselves into capitalist agriculturists, he also respected the principle of ‘small private property ownership’”. Each time a farm was expropriated, the owner could retain the *hacienda* core, not to exceed 150 hectares of irrigated land” (Otero 1989: 283). This was considered a small property, a *rancho*. From a broad perspective, the agrarian reform set off an “era of rural prosperity which many considers as the backbone of the successful 5.7 per cent annual growth of Mexican agriculture from 1940 to 1965” (Arizpe 1981: 629). Local, regional and national groups flourished to make pressure for the betterment of peasants’ life. Programs of public health, alphabetization, the creation of schools for agriculture, insurances, and women organisations proliferated across the country.

The main pillar of his reform was the *ejido*, a form of possession very similar to producer cooperatives, that was aimed at preserving the productivity of large units and “to maintain an uninterrupted flow of agricultural raw materials and wage goods to industry” (Otero 1989: 283). The *ejido* is a vast plot of land distributed to peasants (on the basis of an application process and specific eligibility criteria) that are entitled to its use in a common way. It is governed by an assembly, commissioners and the *ejidatario* who is entitled to its possession. The *ejidatario* is not a proprietor, but a producer without dependency relations with large landowners; he does not own the land and is not allowed to transfer these rights to non-heirs, but he has the usufruct and the right to work it individually and transfer it

to the heirs.<sup>3</sup> It is managed by the administrative councils of peasants that were responsible toward the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal (National Credit Bank of Ejido). This bank was established to give credit and also the technical assistance needed by farmworkers in order to create large units of production through collective management of land (Hewitt de Alcantara 1977: 12). The reform was a comprehensive management and intervention by the state into the agricultural sector, “prácticamente todas las fases, aspectos y momentos del proceso de producción y distribución de los productos tuvieron que atenderse en alguna medida” (De la Peña 1989: 7). Furthermore, it was an organisation of the political, economic, social and cultural life of peasantries through the definition of land productivity, availability of credit, technical advancements and irrigation systems, fiscal and administrative support, integration of land production to the industrial one, commercialization of agriculture.

In brief, the state together with other economic and political institutions re-structured the broad society, not only the countryside, by creating a dependent relationship between the state and individuals through the collective formations, such as the *ejido*, and the political ties that bonded local governments, political factions, and ideologies: “El pacto se había convertido en una relación directa y fundamental entre el Estado y el individuo, pasando por la comunidad, el pueblo y la nación” (De la Peña 1989: 8). In this guise, *cardenismo* is recognized as the twin brother of New Deal as it assigned political capacity to popular classes of society, and it provided education to all social sectors together with economic growth and national infrastructures as a means of stability and containment of social conflicts. Many landlords resisted the reform by bullying and killing peasants, and they refused to surrender lands. In order to face this strong opposition, the President established armed rural militias as part of the Federal army to fight back landlords’ aggressions: “For a few years conflicts killed thousands of peasants and landlords’ bullies, but by 1940 peasant militias had 60,000 men and could defend their ejido” (Tauger 2011: 129).

Cárdenas did not consider the *ejido* as a charitable act towards peasants, nor as a school for landowners (*minifundista*), but as the pillar for the reorganisation of land into cooperatives (Hewitt de Alcantara 1977: 10). *Ejido* and land redistribution process became the symbol of the national economy rebirth, and the fulfilment of peasants’ desire for land. Nonetheless, it was a form of possession, organisation and production highly contested by different political groups, either deemed as unproductive, a socialist struc-

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<sup>3</sup> In this period, *ejidatario* were mostly men, while after the 1980s, the number of *ejidataria* increased and investigations are available on the topic, see ALMEIDA 2012.

ture, or a betrayal of the revolutionary ideals. In a similar guise, Cárdenas has been defined as a socialist, reformist capitalist or a populist, and his successor Manuel Ávila Camacho inherited part of these considerations. The debate around the agrarian reform and Cárdenas' politics is endless and has generated a vast literature on the topic (De la Peña 1989; Warman 2001).

For sure, the agrarian movement that spread since the beginning of the revolution seriously attacked and profoundly transformed the essential relations that once structured Mexican society. By the end of Cárdenas presidency, the 57.4 per cent of workable land was possessed by *ejidatario*, and land rental and appropriation were deeply modified, hence changing economic, social and political relations broadly (De la Peña 1989: 4). The reform mainly aimed at distributing the largest amount of land to the highest number of individuals while paying (less) attention to the issue of productivity.

The Plan Sexenal that the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR, National Revolutionary Party) presented with the candidate and next president Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) aimed to consolidate the economic role of *ejido*. The improvement of its productivity was the result of political negotiations and balance between the socialist demands from the peasant sectors of society – with particular concern for the indigenous populations – and the emergent élite that kept imposing capitalist relations in post-revolutionary Mexican society. In other words, the state consolidated the *ejido* as a third space for land possession – besides private property (*minifundio*) and communal *ejido* (i.e. Comarca Lagunera, Valle del Yaqui, Valle de Mexicali) – in which the cooperative production would have supported the accumulation required by capitalism for industrializing the country. This was accomplished, within the national context, in the late 1940s when credit availability was expanded and technological advance introduced. For many observers, *ejido* should have become “haciendas without hacendados” while peasants kept demanding land, and the Federación Nacional Campesina aimed at the collective socialized possession for all *ejido* of the country (De la Peña 1989: 13-18). The reform of the Agrarian law in 1940 made the access to land more flexible and improved state intervention towards an incorporation of *ejido* into capitalist relations. As a consequence, *agrarismo* changed drastically and,

El control de la producción quedó fundamentalmente en manos del Estado, de comerciantes, de banqueros, de empresarios, y muy poco en manos de ejidatarios [...] Los ejidatarios tenían como preocupación principal la producción, mientras que para los solicitantes, la cuestión de obtener tierra era lo fundamental. Los primeros pasaron a depender del Estado para la gestión productiva y los segundos permanecían pendientes del Estado en su esperanza de obtener tierras (De la Peña 1989: 19).

Under Camacho, *ejidatario* received land of scarce quality and difficult access to irrigated land. This change intensified critics against the *ejido* – both for economic and ideological reasons – that was deemed as scarcely productive and not appropriate for accumulation towards agricultural exportation. The lack of technology and capital availability was the major disadvantage, together with limitations that forbid *ejidatario* to employ workers, sell or rent land. Nonetheless, land was illegally rented as a direct answer to the scarcity of credit from Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal that financed only 25 per cent of *ejido*, with delays and substantial administrative problems. Despite these limits and difficulties, the agricultural production quantum for exportation increased by 17 per cent per year between 1940 and 1942 (De la Peña 1989).

In November 1942, the agrarian law was modified and the collective organisation of *ejido* was preferred only when the individual one was not economically feasible. At the same time, its commissioners and the assembly were not allowed to remove *ejidatario* anymore, and only the President of the Mexican Republic was entitled to it (Medina 1978: 243). Also for this reason, peasants, local officials and other institutional representatives became more active in consulting and petitioning the President for land and labour concerns, making available to us an interesting body of sources.

The presidency of Camacho favoured the creation of small private properties, and the redistribution process through the *ejido* form of possession declined heavily without any compensation of wage increase; in fact, from 1930 to 1947, agricultural wages decreased by 46 per cent and also industrial ones by 35 per cent. The overall condition of peasants without land deteriorated, in particular for agricultural day labourers – *jornalero agrícola* (De la Peña 1989: 101). The land reform process embraced the entrepreneurial paradigm and turned towards the international competition of agricultural production that may be supported only by 15 per cent of productive units of Mexico. Despite peasants being armed and militias being displayed in various regions since *cardenismo*, peasants kept being killed by wealthy owners and petitioned the President to be allowed to leave the country.<sup>4</sup> Migration still kept open peasants' line of flight from political turmoil and local conflicts.

During the presidency of Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-1952), peasants constantly demanded for land distribution, as much as *ejidatario* called upon administrative obstructions, renewed large land estate concentration,

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<sup>4</sup> From *Comité Part. Ejec. Agrario de la Barranca, Municipio de Tempoal, Veracruz to Presidencia de la Republica*, June 9, 1944, Archivo General de la Nación, México D.F. (hereafter AGN), Manuel Ávila Camacho, 1940-1946 (hereafter MAC), caja 0794, 546.6/120-7.

lack of credit and irrigation land, and government facilitation for the creation of small property compared to collective possessions. New *ejido* were created, but in smaller proportions in comparison with large land estates, and their overall agricultural production diminished from 50 per cent to 37 per cent: they increasingly became the object of ideological conflicts, progressively losing access to credit, political support and internal cohesion. In short, Alemán privileged the creation of small property and even *neolatifundio* through the colonization of land in the northern areas of the country, in particular in the Sonora and Baja California states (De la Peña 1989: 140-149).

Among many concurrent issues that favoured this shift in the early 1950s, there was a specific representation that portrayed peasants as subject of limited desires, so to speak. Contemporary observers such as Constitutionalist and some scholars implicitly suggested that peasants only called for sustenance and, “once their nutritional requirements have been met, peasants no longer participate in the construction of the state” (Becker 1995: 4). This representation was sided with the need for accumulation of international exports that increasingly depicted peasants as scarcely productive subjects and *ejido* as rarely profitable agricultural units. These tensions opened up to the institutional conflicts between governments (state, federal and local) and different social practices. In this guise, it is relevant to expand our gaze on land and labour by bringing mobility into the broader picture and considering the simultaneous program of labour mobility that the Mexican state (re)introduced during the Second World War.

## 2. MANAGED LABOUR MOBILITY FROM THE MEXICAN PERSPECTIVE

Immediately after Cárdenas’ agrarian reform, while the rural world was dealing with its major change after decades, Mexico negotiated a bilateral agreement with the USA for sending workers as a contribution to the Second World War effort: the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program is enacted as an exceptional measure of war in 1942, and then protracted till 1964 under the unofficial name of “Programa Bracero/Bracero Program”.<sup>5</sup> Put

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<sup>5</sup> Literally, in Mexican Spanish, *bracero* are those individuals ‘who use their arms’, from the word *brazo*, arm. In Italian language, the term *bracciante* comes from the word *braccio*, arm, and was similarly employed for identifying workers employed in low-skill tasks that mainly require muscular power since the late XVIII century. In Mexico, the term *bracero* entered public discourse by depicting a clear image of the migrant workers’ function: migrants are reduced to their body parts needed to work, they are reified and degraded by the inner workings of a labour regime (SCHMIDT CAMACHO 2008). While *bracero* took the stage of public debate and insti-

in the sterile language of diplomacy, *bracero* are the object of negotiation in a series of bilateral agreements between Mexico and the United States for importing Mexican workers to be employed in railroad maintenance and south-western fields (Bernardi 2018). Mexico is usually acknowledged as the weakest state in the bilateral negotiations throughout the whole period (Fitzgerald 2008). On the other side of the border, agricultural employers and powerful associations in southwestern United States have reiterated their request for Mexican workers, sustaining a labour-shortage argument “for which the only evidence provided is the assertion of employers themselves. Federal regulatory agencies, as well as most members of Congress accepted employer attestations as factual and without need of verification” (Plascencia 2018: 124). In sum, the program is largely considered a state-managed labour program that accomplished both US grower needs as well as Mexican workers needs of moving pushed by unemployment, and also largely supported by the Mexican state as a form of modernization of the people, and hence of the nation (Cohen 2011).

Despite grasping factual features, this approach has however become dominant and largely assumed in absolute terms, so preventing further studies able to go beyond the dichotomies between US growers (and recruiters)/Mexican workers or US state/Mexican state. Among the vast literature on the topic, few notable exceptions have deconstructed this view and have adopted the Mexican perspective and a pluralist approach. David Fitzgerald (2006; 2008) and Deborah Cohen (2011) have analysed the program from the point of view of the Mexican state; Michael Snodgrass (2011) considered the perspective of Mexican workers and the state, adopting a transnational history approach; Diana Irina Córdoba Ramírez (2013; 2017) analysed the internal political debate in Mexico about the process of recruitment and centres’ establishment; the detailed study by Alberto Maldonado García (2016) has focused on the relation between the state and federal governments with local and municipal ones in the states of Michoacán, Jalisco and Guanajuato; in her outstanding study, Mireya Loza

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tutional discourses during World War II, the term had been applied to previous experiences of labour-managed migration in the area, substantiating the idea of Mexican workers as a ‘reserve army of labor’, a well-known concept in Marx’s critique of political economy (HAHAMOVITCH 2003). So-called *bracero* turned the negative label into forms of self-organisation and protest such as *Alianza Bracero Proa*, see ASTORGA MORALES 2015. About the Emergency Farm Labor Program and so-called “Bracero Program”, besides the studies by Mexican scholars previously cited, see also the pivotal studies by MADRAZO 1945; FERNÁNDEZ DEL CAMPO 1946; DE ALBA 1954; GARCÍA TÉLLEZ 1955; SALINAS 1955; CASARRUBIAS OCAMPO 1956; VARGAS Y CAMPOS 1964; ALANÍS 1999; DURAND 1999, 2007a, 2007b. For a long-term perspective on the recruitment of *bracero* since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see PLASCENCIA 2018. The already classic studies on the program from US scholars’ perspectives are: GALARZA 1956, 1964; CRAIG 1971; GARCÍA Y GRIEGO 1981; GAMBOA 1990; CALAVITA 1992; FITZGERALD 2006, 2008.

(2016) has collected hundreds of oral histories analysing the resistances and different constructions of racial and sexual norms by *mestizo* and Mayan *bracero*; Catherine Vézina (2016) has proposed a range of causes for explaining labour migration from Mexico, in particular from Guanajuato, that together with other centre-western Mexican states, provided the largest number of migrant workers. Considered in a broader perspective as a noticeable example of a guest worker program, “Programa Bracero” marked the historical passage from liberal policies to state intervention, from private management to public ones (Surak 2013).

In a different guise, it may be viewed as the political assemblage of several devices already at play (informal recruitment, deportations, criminalization, violation of contracts, indebtedment, etc.) that showed their effectiveness in *capturing* and *valorising* turbulent migrations and workers mobility for decades (Bernardi 2020). By adopting this perspective, we may consider this labour mobility program as part of a broader mobility regime that did not rely only upon internal or external factors of attraction and repulsion, nor only upon the negotiations between various national and international governments. The program was part of a broader transnational regime that still requires further investigation, in particular of the Mexican historical context and the important transformation that the rural world was undertaking between the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, the recent body of scholarship – coherent in its effort of assuming a “Mexican” or a transnational perspective – has somehow skipped the analysis of the intertwining of mobility and land related issues. As mentioned before in the introduction, the scholarship about the relation between land and mobility are focused on the post 1990s period, or their aim is to investigate peasants’ trajectories of proletarianization. On one side, the rural world is conceived as left out of the urbanization and industrialization processes, so that the Program and farmworkers’ mobility – both internal as external – are complementary to this inside-out orientation of peasants from rural areas to the cities. On the other side, the Mexican government’s position was either of easing economic pressure on landless peasants by sending them to the USA, and of simultaneously emphasizing the nationalist rhetoric through government’s campaigns to advise immigrants on the problems and dangers they would encounter in the US to prevent farm workers from leaving (Cano and Délano 2007). Recent scholarship has highlighted the prominent state discourse and institutions’ role in attempting to slow down workers’ emigration (*ibid.*; Maldonado García 2016). In particular, Maldonado García’s work (2016) shows that Municipal governments in Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán used both mobility and immobility to manage local political conflicts and protests, hence shedding new light on inter-government conflicts and their use of peasants’ im/mobility. In brief, sometimes the

local governments use their power of selling cards to get rid of political opponents (*sinarquista*) by sending them to the United States, while other times, peasants were deprived of this possibility to prevent them from benefiting of the income generated by the program.<sup>6</sup>

Despite identifying a single “Mexican position”, we may acknowledge the complex relation between labour and mobility in these crucial years, and highlight the ambiguous politics and practices engaged in by the actors involved. On the government side, a dilemma had to be tamed. The ideological background of the revolution and the participation to the Alliance in World War II depicted the modern citizen of a pacified country. In this guise, the Program was aimed at avoiding further social tumults and protests by engaging with temporary labour recruitment and, at the same time, at forging the image of a strong independent nation-state fully devoted to the modernization process (Cohen 2011). In short, the state was sending abroad its best elements, largely to improve their skill and to support US agriculture as equal allied nation-states. The representation of *bracero* as the modern migrant was then employed for justifying their mobility that was not detrimental to the national economy or to the ideological promotion of the successful politics enacted by the Mexican governments, in particular the Agrarian reform.

Even if this analysis is central to the understanding of the governmental politics of representation and identity-making process, it has been jeopardized by further research on the divergent politics by state, federal and local governments. In fact, the latter were more prone to use workers mobility for their interests so as to circumvent laws and central government regulations (Maldonado García 2016). Furthermore, the representation of *bracero* as temporary workers was also an answer to public opinion, parties and worker associations’ pressures to interrupt the program because of the exploitation and abuses that Mexicans suffered in US fields. Workers were somehow ‘rented’ to the United States in order to comply with the alliance first, and then for diverse reasons, such as relieving social conflicts by circulating the most “troublesome” persons and giving temporary employment to landless and unemployed peasants. All these tensions and representations forged a complex context in which different actors promoted – and imposed – their view, politics, and social practices. For sure, besides their fundamental and protagonist role in the revolution, peasants have been largely obscured subjects in the historiography of that period, even if they

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<sup>6</sup> Each Municipal government had to communicate the number of potential eligible workers in the municipality to the central government that would distribute them the eligibility cards on the basis of a proportionality criteria. The card allowed the worker to be selected in the contracting centres.

are the most central ones both for the general reproduction of human lives and for the accumulation in the agricultural sector that allowed the renewed industrialization of the 1950s.

Some issues can be highlighted for readdressing the relation between mobility and immobilisation of peasants in the Mexican fields, and for shedding light on their transnational practices.

### 3. SOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING PEASANTS AND *EJIDATARIO* IM/MOBILITY

Peasants were affected by the trope of the “modern citizen” as much as by the idea that their only and higher desire was to be bonded to land. These two representations appeared to be addressed to two distinct subjects: on one side, the hungry landless peasant that may either obtain the land or move to urban areas and, on the other side, the ‘worker of the land’ devoted to modernizing the country through his transnational mobility. Even if scholars have analysed them separately, in the early 1940s and throughout the 1950s, these two representations coexisted and were addressed to the same specific social group – peasants – that constituted the overwhelming majority of the Mexican population. At the same time, these representations crystallized peasants’ identity by erasing their desires and autonomous practices that overcame and refused top-down politics.

By diverting from these assumptions and envisaging peasants as dynamic subjectivities, we may find novel practices and strategies that challenge normative descriptions of rural workers in their opposition to urban and transnational ones, so as to re-inscribe the revolutionary demands and agrarian reform into the autonomous practices of peasants. In this essay, the demand for land by peasants as one of the main causes that led to the Mexican Revolution is not to be denied *per se*: the astounding peasant revolution was animated by a genuine desire for land. Nonetheless, this may not be true for all peasants and throughout the period 1940s-1950s, as the desire for land does not necessarily imply the acceptance of the permanent obligation to reside and work on it, without the possibility of movement and other forms of activities. Questioning some primary sources could shed light on these elements and open further paths of research.

The massive process of land distribution, the introduction of *ejido* – both the cooperative and the communal forms –, and the glorious representation of the revolutionary ideals did not eliminate peasants’ mobility. In fact, since the early 1940s, in the states of Chiapas, Coahuila, Durango, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Yucatán many land owners, growers, unions, and local representatives complained about the “abandoned fields”: they unani-

mously required peasants to stay in the fields and not to leave the country.<sup>7</sup> In the historical climax of the agrarian reform that tied up peasants to the land by reinforcing their symbolic role in the making of the nation, a wave of complaints emphasised workers' lines of flight from that politics of immobilisation. The considerable number of states from where the President was petitioned to cope with this issue is already tellingly of its massive dimension. Also, the variety of states involved suggests that the phenomenon is not associated with individual government politics, nor to climate or soil issues: from Sierra Madre Oriental to the Central Plateau, from Sierra Madre del Sur till the Yucatecan peninsula of the Gulf of Mexico, these states embrace almost all areas of the country. By considering all the states in which sources testify a demand for interrupting the Program, in the first place, we can notice that just one of these states is along the border, Coahuila, probably due to the limited agricultural development in the area at that time, or also because of the possibility of commuting between the two sides of the border; for sure the state was at first excluded from the quota system that assigned the number of contracts to be awarded.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> From José G. Sánchez Gutiérrez, *Tlaquepaque Jalisco to the President of Mexico*, July 8, 1943, in AGN-MAC, caja 0794, 546.6/120-4; From Salvador Castro Rivera, *Zacatecas-Zacatecas to the President of Mexico*, August 3, 1944, in AGN-MAC, caja 0794, 546.6/120-6; From Corl. Gabino Vizcarra-Presidente de la Legión Mexicana Madero 55-Ciudad to the President of Mexico, July 16, 1943, in AGN-MAC, caja 0793, 546.6/120; From Ma. de Jesús Jiménez-Esc. prev. Ind. Com. Fed. Guadalupe Jal. to the President of Mexico, May 22, 1944 in *ibid.*; From Enequino Ríos Gerencete Coop. David Flores Reynada, *Atoyac Guerrero to the President of Mexico*, December 29, 1944, in *ibid.*; From Comité Central Permanente del México de Afuera-Uruguay to the President of Mexico, April 8, 1946 in *ibid.*; From Carmen Gallegos González-Durango to the President of Mexico, April 17, 1946 in *ibid.*; From Carmen Gallegos González-Durango to the President of Mexico, April 25, 1946, in *ibid.*; From Vicepresidente Jesús Torrens Barriga and Secretario Jesús Velázquez Cuervo of Cámara Nacional de Comercio de Oaxaca to Secretaría de la Presidencia de la República, April 16, 1945, in AGN-MAC, caja 0794, 546.6/120-4; From Victor M. López, *Secretario comité Regional Soledad Veracruz*, to the President of Mexico, 3 March 3, 1945, in *ibid.*; From Prof. Jesús J.B. Castro-Director de la Escuela Rural Federal Gómez Farías, *Municipio de Tangancicuaro-Michoacán*, June 15, 1943, in *ibid.*; From Benjamín Arellano-Secretario de Comerciantes Asociación Nacionalista to the President of Mexico, August 16, 1943, in *ibid.*; From Luis Novoa Moreno – *Presidente de la Cámara Nacional de Comercio de Tacámbaro, Michoacán*, to the President of Mexico, January 18, 1944 in AGN-MAC, caja 0794-10341, 546.6/120-7; From Centro Patronal de Tulancingo Hidalgo to the President of Mexico, February 28, 1945, in AGN-MAC, caja 0794-10341, 546.6/120-4; From Braulio Ortiz Presidente de la Cámara Nacional de Comercio de Tulancingo Hidalgo to the President of Mexico, February 27, 1945, in *ibid.*; From Cámara Nacional de la Industria de la Transformación de Mexicali-Baja California to the President of Mexico, December 18, 1945, in AGN-MAC, caja 0793, 546.6/120-2; From Adolfo Aguirre-Secretario de Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, *Villahermosa to the President of Mexico*, June 12, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0795-14591, 546.6/120-26; From Salvador Durán Pérez, *Secretario General Federación Regional Trabajadores Soconusco – Tapachula Chiapas to the President of Mexico*, AGN, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines 1952-1958 (hereafter ARC), caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> In Coahuila, the same Union Civil declared the need to repatriate *bracero*, but then asked the government to sign a new agreement just a month later when 30.000 workers were

The letters sent to the President directly or implicitly refer to the door opened by the Program as the main cause of peasants' practice. Complaints sent by growers from the twelve aforementioned states affirmed that peasants massively abandoned the fields to be recruited in the program. Because of their flight, there were not enough workers "to pick up cotton".<sup>9</sup> The labour shortage argument was reiterated repeatedly: this argument is usually dismissed by scholars when analysing so-called non-Western/Third World/Global South countries whereas the main concern is to highlight the excessive demographic growth in relation to labour force's availability. But the "long and loud" cry of growers in the United States (Cohen 1987) is not the only one, but could stand for the general demand by entrepreneurs to get tractable, disposable, and cheap workers. Complaints turned also into the clear demand for ending the program<sup>10</sup> and introducing measures "to prevent the exodus of braceros".<sup>11</sup> It was demanded to prevent the departure of skilled workers, "obreros especializados", that were trained for years, and were needed "more than ever" in the industries.<sup>12</sup> The local division of CTM union in Mexicali, Baja California, petitioned the President for interrupting the flow of workers towards Mexicali and San Luis, Sonora, by sending soldiers to patrol the border.<sup>13</sup> The Camara Agrícola y

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ready to leave for the US because of the "critical and deplorable situation" in the State, *From Union Civil Coahuila to the President of Mexico*, January 11, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0794-103401, 546.6/120-4; *From Union Civil Coahuila to the President of Mexico*, February 18, 1946, in AGN-MAC, caja 0794-103401, 546.6/120-4.

<sup>9</sup> *From Juan Rodríguez, León Guanajuato to the President of Mexico*, November 11, 1943, in AGN-MAC, caja 0794-10341, 546.6/120-4; *From Victor M. López, Secretario Comité Regional Soledad Veracruz to the President of Mexico*, March 3, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0794-103401, 546.6/120-4; *From Eugenio Elorduy – Presidente Cámara Nal. de Comercio de Mexicali, Baja California to the Secretario de Gobernación*, September 22, 1948, AGN, Miguel Alemán Valdés 1946-1952 (hereafter MAV), caja 592, 546.6/1-2 [all translations from Spanish to English are by the author].

<sup>10</sup> *From Confederación Nacional Pequeña Propiedad Agrícola to the President of Mexico*, October 20, 1947, AGN-MAV, caja 594, 546.6/1-32; *From Cámara Nacional de la Industria de Transformación de Mexicali, Baja California to the President of Mexico*, September 22, 1948, AGN-MAV, caja 592, 546.6/1-2; *From Federación Nacional de Defensa Revolucionaria to the President of Mexico*, January 25, 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 6-7; *From Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación to the President of Mexico*, January 20, 1954, in *ibid.*; *From Heriberto G. Ramos, Union de Productores de Algodón to the President of Mexico*, August 12, 1955, AGN-ARC, caja 883, 546.6/31; *From Camara Agrícola y Ganadera de Torreón Coahuila to the President of Mexico*, August 13, 1955, in *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *From Antonio Vizcarra Espinosa – P. los Nuevos Centros de Población Agrícola, Sonora to the President of Mexico*, January 23, 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 6-7; *From Bartolomé Vargas Lugo to the President of Mexico*, January 13, 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 172; *From Ing. Alberto Salinas Ramos Presidente Asociación Nacional Cosecheros, Ciudad de México to the President of Mexico*, January 14, 1954, in *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *From Antonio Ruiz Galindo to the President of Mexico*, September 9, 1943, AGN-MAC, caja 0794-10341, 546.6/120-4.

<sup>13</sup> *From Federación Territorial de la C.T.M.-Mexicali, B.C. to Arcadio Ojeda García-Jefe Depar-*

Ganadera de Torreón demanded a halt to the recruitment in the state,<sup>14</sup> as much as the Union de Productores de Algodon de la Republica Mexicana of Coahuila and Durango required the suspension of the recruitment because “cosechas algodón deben levantarse en cantidad y calidad. Necesitase para exportar este producto sin demerito para [incomprehensible] en Mercado mundiales”.<sup>15</sup> These demands were not limited to the first years of the program, and even during *el milagro* – the economic expansion of early 1950s –, there were protests and requests for interrupting the program. Still, in 1954, after the repatriation of undocumented migrants and contract workers under so-called “Operation Wetback” in the USA, there was a demand for workers in Mexico, and again labour representatives requested the end of the program.<sup>16</sup> Local representatives, growers and unions were largely opposing the program in many Mexican states, denouncing the mobility of peasants as a proper “exodus” from the country, decrying the abandonment of the nation by peasants that had become *bracero* through their mobility.

Despite Mexican and US states’ strong attempts to create a positive representation of *bracero*, many Mexican growers opposed the Program since the very beginning. Peasants’ mobility was perceived as a permanent loss of labour force, and hence detrimental to the economy.<sup>17</sup> As peasants were deemed as key subjects in restructuring and renovating the image of modernity, their mobility was also a loss for the nation. Peasants left the lands in which they were employed, and motivations may range from low salaries and labour coercion to poor working conditions in the fields. The lack of land and incomplete agrarian reform may have encouraged peasants to embrace the path to the north; also the scarce quality of land assigned to *ejidatario* led to their indebtedness with the Banco Ejidal de México.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, many different types of workers were involved in the “exodus” and not only agricultural workers. For example, in Villaher-

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*tamento de Población Mexicali to Secretaría de la Presidencia de la Republica*, February 11, 1946, in AGN-MAC, caja 0793, 546.6/120-2.

<sup>14</sup> From *Camara Agricola y Ganadera de Torreón to the President of Mexico*, August 13, 1955, AGN-ARC, caja 883, 546.6/31.

<sup>15</sup> From *Union de Productores de Algodon de la Republica Mexicana of Coahuila and Durango to the President of Mexico*, August 12, 1955, AGN-ARC, caja 883, 546.6/31.

<sup>16</sup> From *Juan F. Acosta, Presidente Unión de los sin Trabajo – Zacatecas, Zacatecas to the President of Mexico*, October 16, 1953, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 172.

<sup>17</sup> It is worth to consider that commuting was still not a viable option for most migrants due both to logistic issues as well as because it was not part of the “tradition of migration” that, in the early 1940s, belonged more to the regional history of the northern states.

<sup>18</sup> From *J. Jesús Tapia Morales - Congregación de Gervasio Mendoza, Municipio Salvatierra. Guajajuato to the President of Mexico*, April 8, 1943, in AGN-MAC, caja 0793, 546.6/120.

mosa (Tabasco), la Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social reported the job of 422 enlisted *bracero*, and among them were rural teachers (*maestro rural*), merchants, cook and artisans, among others. It is worth highlighting that the percentage of unemployed (11 per cent) is almost equal to that of employed in the third sector (10.5 per cent), and that also minors were allegedly recruited.<sup>19</sup> The government representative for workers' recruitment in Tabasco wrote:

Muchos individuos menores de edad y en su mayoría propietarios de terrenos con ganados vacunos, productores de plátano roatán, comerciantes establecidos, empleados públicos con sueldos regulares etc., que no tienen necesidad de salir del Estado y que conforme al tantas veces citado telegrama no deben salir.<sup>20</sup>

As the government officials complained about the recruitment of persons that were not allowed to leave the country by state decision, local representatives – as the Inspector of Labour – were responsible for getting around the law and attempted to give a free pass to many.<sup>21</sup>

Usually, scholars consider selling cards only as a matter of corruption, as a violation of law that imposed bribes upon peasants, hence fostering the black market and informal labour in Mexico. Of course, unpaid labour and bribes were illicit, but in some cases, these illegal acts can be considered also as a specific use of the right entitled to Municipal governments to distribute *bracero* cards in order to cope with the demands by growers and unions, and their economic needs. In fact, Municipal governments, once obtained cards from the central administration, had the power to decide which persons were “more in need” than others of working in the US fields.<sup>22</sup> As Municipal governments were also responsible for settling the disputes on land distribution and *ejido* entitlements, they detained extensive power in the mobilisation and immobilisation of peasants. In this context,

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<sup>19</sup> From Lic. Adelor D. Sala, Srío. Gral Gobierno de Tabasco to the President of Mexico, March 4, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26; From Lic. Constantino Martínez de Escobar to Secretario particular de la Presidencia de la Republica, April 24, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26, pp. 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Informe confidencial from ex-diputado Candelario Bosada M. to Secretario General de Gobierno, March 2, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26, pp. 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> Jesús Lombardining, Secretario Comité Regional Centro, Villahermosa Tabasco to the President of Mexico, March 7, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0794, 546.6/120-4.

<sup>22</sup> This power also led to the implicit construction of the category of the “needy persons”, besides creating dependent relationships and configuring local powers. Even if this issue is beyond the aims of this paper, the construction of this category and the process of hierarchization that was put in place by exercising this power should be investigated for understanding the role of the relationship between the labour mobility program and the agrarian reform in the structuring of local powers.

the unpaid labour requested by local officials to get access to the selection process and to obtain the cards was probably the answer to this exodus. Peasants left their work to enrol in the program despite various attempts (also by the same local governments) to bond them to the fields, like illegally demanding for unpaid work in the fields to receive the needed certificates for the Program's selection process. The Mexican state centralised the negotiation with the US, but also left enough power to local governments to allow them to use their right for managing conflicts and the labour force. This power was also contested, and peasants – usually through workers' associations and federal inspectors – protested both the distribution of cards and assignment of land by addressing petitions to the Mexican presidents.<sup>23</sup>

The mobility of peasants and their right to the land was still troublesome once back to Mexico. Demands for farm work multiplied in the attempt to manage the need for labour force and also for *capturing the flow* of returning *bracero*. In Jalisco and Distrito Federal, the reintegration of workers into the national economic system seemed a viable solution in order to employ them in the fields.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes the same workers went back home and asked the government for a job to avoid another season of agricultural work, or because they found out that in the United States they ended up working more than they had wished to, without health assistance and in poor conditions.<sup>25</sup> In other words, sometimes the refusal of work abroad may be matched with the national need for labour force. They were available to work the land with proper technology for which petitioned the President.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> From *Ex-Diputado Candelario Bosada-El Rapresentate del Gobierno ante la Junta de Rec. de Braceros to the Secretario General de Gobierno*, March 2, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26; From *Adeloro D. Sala, Villahermosa Tabasco, to Secretario Particular de la Presidencia de la Republica*, March 14, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26; From *Adelfo Aguirre, Subsecretario Gobierno Estado de Tabasco to Secretario Particular de la Presidencia de la Republica*, May 9, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26.

<sup>24</sup> From *Jorge Guerrero Aguila, Martín Vázquez Flores, José Terrones García-Portal Diéguez, Villa Corona-Estado de Jalisco*, May 18, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-10; From *Eduardo Gordillo, Atzacapotzalco, México D.F. to the President of Mexico*, September 25, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-14.

<sup>25</sup> From *Fidencio Guzmán Robles, Celestino Vargas Martínez y demás firmantes, Newark-New Jersey (USA) to the President of Mexico*, October 28, 1945, in AGN-MAC, caja 0793-103401, 546.6/120-1; From *Alfonso V. Velázquez, Ismael Becerra C., Ashtabula Ohio (USA) to the President of Mexico*, November 5, 1945, in *ibid.*; From *Gregorio Cisneros, G. Sánchez M. y demás firmatarios, Bellefontaine Ohio (USA) to the President of Mexico*, December 4, 1945, in *ibid.*; From *José Quiñones-Weiser, Idaho (USA) to the President of Mexico*, August 12, 1946, in *ibid.*; From *C. Gilberto Antunéz Giles, Odilón Santiago Quirino, Golconda Nevada (USA) to the President of Mexico*, December 2, 1945, in *ibid.*; From *Juan S. Contreras y Fermin Morales Cruz (and 32 other bracero) to the President of Mexico*, November 25, 1945, in *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> From *Conrado Velázquez Presidente Confederación Nacional de la Juventud Mexicana to the President of Mexico*, February 6, 1945, in AGN-MAC, caja 0794-103401, 546.6/120-4.

Former *bracero* were used to petition the central governments for obtaining land, by circumventing Municipal governments, and by using their symbolic power accrued through the modernization path of labour mobility. Returning *bracero* claimed their piece of land as a reward due to them, the sons of the nation, who deserve gratitude for their emigration to “a foreign land”.<sup>27</sup> The representation of a temporary work abroad was employed by peasants for obtaining their plot, that is to say, a stable job that would have bonded – and immobilised – them to land. In other terms, the mobility was a workers’ practice that served for their desired immobilisation.

But mobility under the Program was not only an aspiration for landless peasants as the *ejidatario* participated in the program. For example, half of the requests for *bracero* cards in Michoacán in 1945 were addressed to *ejidatario* “who had yet to receive their land grants”; 6,000 out of 12,000 eligible unemployed *Michoacanos* were prospective *ejidatario* (Maldonado García 2016: 58). In fact, the Comisariado Ejidal of Zamora in the state of Michoacán, wrote to the President and interested Ministers:

En vista de que algunos compañeros ejidatarios han estado dejando sus parcelas a sus familiares, con el fin de emigrar a los Estados Unidos Americanos del Norte. Esta Agrupación Agraria que representamos en Asamblea Gral de ejidatarios verificada el día 6 de junio anterior, acordó nos dirigiéramos a Us, solicitan de la autorización correspondiente para imponerles el castigo que ese Gobierno de sumerecido cargo juzgue conveniente, por haberse ausentado los compañeros que oportunamente daremos a conocer sus nombres. Así, mismo hacemos de su conocimiento que si no se toman algunas medidas muchos los ejidatarios de la República que tendrán que emigrar a los E.U.A.<sup>28</sup>

The Comisariado Ejidal of San Martín in Puruándiro, Michoacán, sent a request to the President Manuel Ávila Camacho on behalf of thirty *ejidatario* that lost their crop of wheat and chickpea.<sup>29</sup> This is not an exception related to a single area of the country for the specific political frictions due to *sinarquismo*, and still there is a considerable gap in research related to the numbers of *ejidatario* involved in the program – both prospective as well as allotted – and in labour mobility to the USA in general, as they had to circumvent the law in order to leave the country, also through the compli-

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<sup>27</sup> From J.M. García y Arturo Costa Villalón, Mexico D.F. to the President of Mexico, April 25, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 325, 404.1/4248.

<sup>28</sup> From Comisariado Ejidal of Zamora in the state of Michoacán to the President of Mexico, July 12, 1943, AGN-MAC, caja 0794-21741, 546.6/120-7.

<sup>29</sup> From Comisariado Ejidal Municipio San Martín, Puruándiro, Michoacán, December 22, 1944, AGN-MAC, caja 0794-34294, 546.6/120-7.

ance of intermediaries.<sup>30</sup> In a similar guise, sixty *ejidatario* from Irapuato, Guanajuato, demanded for permission to temporarily move to the US as their crops failed because of the lack of rain.<sup>31</sup> These *ejidatario* were more prone to move to the United States than to demand for credit and state support, or moving to Mexican urban areas as “proletarianized” peasants. Ten *ejidatario* from Rancho Nuevo de la Cruz, Guanajuato, demanded for being enrolled as *bracero* as they “lacked the necessary resources to work their land plot”, and guaranteed it to be a temporary measure.<sup>32</sup>

Other areas witnessed the mobility of *ejidatario* that opened their pathway, cutting loose from the law. There were two possible ways to work in the United States. On one side, they could have embraced the path of informal migration and worked without documents or, since 1952, they could have obtained a contract directly in the United States as controls were scarce. On the other side, they could have circumvented the law and been recruited in the program, for example by buying fake documents, and so the formal right to present themselves as prospective *bracero* – *aspirantes* – to the recruitment centres. It occurred in Torreón, in the states of Coahuila, where *ejidatario* were sold false government authorisations for departing as contract workers. Once they had been discovered, they demanded the repayment of the money through the Liga Comunidades Agrarias.<sup>33</sup> In both cases, in order to preserve their right as *ejidatario*, they had to violate the federal law of 1942 that forbid them to move from the country as workers.

Strategies to be recruited for US agricultural labour were manifold, and attempts to be enrolled in the program are testified when unveiled by officials. In Querétaro, some persons coming from the state of Veracruz were rejected because of “serias irregularidades”, such as using a false name or another residence, being a minor or removing footprints on the card not to be identified.<sup>34</sup> All these strategies employed by peasants aimed at being recruited in the program were either under a false identity or against the law.

<sup>30</sup> From Jesus Rodríguez, *Secretario General Liga Comunidades Agrarias Torreón Coahuila to the President of Mexico*, October 11, 1955, AGN-ARC, caja 883, 546.6/31.

<sup>31</sup> From *Comisariado Ejidal San Juan Temascatio, Irapuato, Guanajuato to President Manuel Ávila Camacho*, October 4, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0795-27342, 546.6/120-10.

<sup>32</sup> From *Comisariado Ejidal Rancho Nuevo de la Cruz, Guanajuato, to the President of Mexico*, May 19, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0795-27342, 546.6/120-10.

<sup>33</sup> From *Liga Comunidades Agrarias to the President of Mexico*, October 11, 1955, AGN-ARC, caja 883, 546.6/31.

<sup>34</sup> Declaring a false place of residency was due to the quota that each Mexican state was assigned to send workers to the USA, for which workers moved to other states in order to be recruited. From Roberto Amorós G. to the President of Mexico, April 27, 1945, AGN-MAC, caja 0794-13151, 546.6/120-21.

The control over *ejidatario* had different reasons and a sort of coherence among Mexican states. The federal government explicitly required local and state ones to prevent the migration of employed individuals and all those who have a means of subsistence. In Tabasco, employed peasants in general, and *ejidatario* in particular, were prevented from enrolling in the program as “campesinos estan sembrando maíz para milpas de año, las cuales deberán cosecharse en septiembre y octubre”.<sup>35</sup> The government’s control over migration from Tabasco is pressing: “no debe ser el elemento agrarista o el campesino con trabajo el que salga, sino por el contrario, la juventud económicamente inactiva que según estadísticas formadas por la Secretaría del Trabajo, asciende a una cifra un poco mayor de tres mil, en esa Entidad”.<sup>36</sup> *Ejidatario* and peasants, “el elemento agrarista”, are not allowed to move, as they are not supposed to be in “need” of work. Actually, various sources testify the contrary.

The failure of crop, the Vulcan eruption in Michoacán, and the lack of rain to water the crops were reasons that pushed *ejidatario* to petition the Presidents, demanding *bracero* cards.<sup>37</sup> But also the poor work and life conditions as *ejidatario*: in fact, they clearly denounced the “abusos”, the abuse they suffered and the little money they obtained from farm work in the *ejido*.<sup>38</sup> In other words, forms of coercion and poor working conditions in their *ejido* drove their desire for mobility. This last source is worth to be valued, as it was not only natural disaster, lack of resources, or crop failure that pushed *ejidatario* to petition for working abroad, but also their desire for better working and living conditions despite land possession. It was not only the unavailability of job opportunities in Mexico or the financial constraints (Cano and Délano 2007), nor only the political use of peasants im/mobility by local governments as mentioned before, but also the quality of life, workers’ desire and expectations that played a role in *ejidatario* mobility, and their use of entitled rights. Peasants demanded either land or the enrolment in the program,<sup>39</sup> as they were seen as viable alternatives to live a better life.

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<sup>35</sup> From Adelfo Aguirre, *Secretario de Gobierno de Estado de Tabasco, Villahermosa Tabasco to Secretario particular Presidencia de la Republica de México*, June 12, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26.

<sup>36</sup> From F. Trujillo Gurriá, *Secretario del Trabajo to the President of Mexico*, Junio 18, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-26.

<sup>37</sup> From *Comisariado Ejidal San Martín, Municipio Puruándiro Michoacán, to the President of Mexico*, December 26, 1944, AGN-MAC, 546.6/120-7, caja 0794; From *Julio Reyes (and fourteen other ejidatario) to President Manuel Ávila Camacho*, April 17, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0795, 546.6/120-10.

<sup>38</sup> From *Porfirio Ledesma, Silao Guanajuato to the President of Mexico*, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 6-7, pp. 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> From *Estéban Navarro, Valle de Santiago, Guanajuato to the President of Mexico*, November 2, 1946, AGN-MAC, caja 0795-25279, 546.6/120-10.

## CONCLUSION

In the 1940s and 1950s, the use and possession of the land took different forms – *minifundio*, cooperative and communal *ejido*, *rancho*, *neolatifundio* – as variegated answers to the controversial process of land distribution and political confrontation between peasants, élites members and political factions. *Ejido* became the most notable result of the successful agrarian reform, with *ejidatario* as its main protagonist and symbol of the independent nation. The right to self-subsistence that would have freed peasants from the bond of peonage was recognized through consistent redistribution of land. At the same time, the autonomy recognized to *ejidatario* in managing, cultivating, and working the land was sided with limitations to their mobility that, by state intervention, immobilised them in their field: *ejidatario* were entitled to collective land possession, but could not leave the country “as workers”.

The institutional representation of peasants and of their relation to land created two images: the landless peasants were deemed as solely interested to obtain land for subsistence and their reproduction while, once land was obtained, *ejidatario*'s concern was productivity for external (capitalist) production. The desire to obtain the land was turned into the image of an emergent capitalist agricultural worker devoted to land profitability, willingly immobilised and bonded to his land. *Ejidatario* were peasants that obtained land and means of subsistence. While scholars and politicians often deemed peasants as individuals calling only for sustenance, we wondered why *ejidatario* developed practices of mobility that clearly aimed at overcoming the simple reproduction of their lives. Whereas the debate about *ejido*'s productivity targeted the lack of commercialisation and the ability of production for the international market, their subsistence was largely satisfied.

The relation between mobility and immobility was twisted towards peasants' autonomy in various ways within the context of a massive agrarian reform – politically promoted, legally framed and military defended by peasants' revolutionary groups – that was also a form of immobilisation to land managed and organised by the state. Landless peasants may have been largely satisfied with their plot of land and the realised subsistence, so adopting immobilisation to land as a form of autonomy and independence. In a different guise, landless peasants strategically used mobility and the representation of migrants as modernising subjects to reclaim their plot of land, petitioning the government to recognise the efforts of the ‘sons of the nation’. *Ejidatario*, once they obtained land – hence their desired immobilisation – embraced mobility not only for coping with productivity

issues, but more relevantly, for improving their living conditions and escaping from coercive relations that arose in the *ejido* administrative structure. Peasants' social practices reshaped the space of labour and entangled their mobility to land possession. While migrant workers' valorisation by various private and state actors occurs along the routes of mobility as much as the places of immobilisation (Bernardi 2023, forthcoming), peasants may use both mobility and immobilisation as drivers of their autonomy to refuse states' legal structure and politics towards the fulfilment of their desires.

State's attempts in *capturing and circulating* the unemployed peasants through the Program opens up a necessary consideration of labour management, also in Mexico. Because of its dependency on the US economy, migration has always been deemed just as the escape valve of an exceeding labour force – largely due to demographic reasons – while close attention to specific dynamics and politics, both economic and of representation, have unveiled unusual practices by peasants and contestation by government and institutional actors to peasants' mobility. Far from being a peculiarity of Western/First World economies, the labour shortage argument has been flaunted also in peasant Mexico, hence reframing the emergence of capitalist relations at the dusk of the agrarian reform, through the claim for agricultural labour that often may have actually obscured the demand for cheap, disposable and tractable workers.

Mexican peasants were dynamic subjects that navigated the dramatic changes occurred in the 1940 and 1950s through the use of transnational mobility and immobilisation to land, while the cry of labour scarcity sided migrant peasants' valorisation through managed guest-worker programs.

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