

Communal Work, Forced Labor, and Road Building in Mexico, 1920–1958

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In 1940 a group of villagers from the Oaxaca town of Zapotitlán Lagunas wrote to the president to protest that the local authorities were forcing them to build a new road for free.¹ Every day, local policemen stormed into their houses, pulled them out of bed, and marched them to the site of the new route. Here, they were forced at gunpoint to work for twelve hours without food, rest, or remuneration. They had never agreed to the project and as “proletarians” they deserved at least the minimum salary for such labor. In reply, the local mayor claimed that these villagers formed a small minority. They were longtime refuseniks, who had repeatedly disobeyed the authorities and simply wanted to “interrupt works of public utility” and “hamper a village that wants to progress.” As the mayor explained, “Tomorrow Zapotitlán will be a town of great improvements, an air field, a road, and other improvements . . . from which we will obtain happiness.” Most had accepted his claims and “offered their labor with good will.”²

In the years following the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican state attempted to rebuild the country. The program involved political debates between federal forces and regional powerbrokers, socioeconomic ventures including land distribution and union support designed to diminish inequality, and cultural efforts aimed at integrating Mexico’s socially and ethnically diffuse population into the nation. But the scheme also involved the construction of major infrastructure projects, airfields, schools, civil buildings, and most importantly roads. To date, few historians have examined this process, preferring to view the practice of state formations as a set of relatively pacific cultural negotiations between government-backed emissaries and the mass of urban and rural Mexicans.³ Yet, as a handful of historians have started to argue, postrevolutionary state formation comprised not only cultural but also material processes.⁴ These reconfigured national, regional, and local economies; realigned political and economic elites; and reestablished social hierarchies. They also regularly involved the deployment of violence by

soldiers, local police forces, and off-the-books hitmen.⁵ Often, this violence had overtly political aims and was designed to impose unpopular authorities, disband troublesome voters, or extinguish small-scale insurrections. But, as in the case of Zapotitlán Lagunas, federal and local governments also used coercion of the poorest, most vulnerable, and often indigenous members of society in order to fulfil what they deemed as economic necessities. The modern, interconnected, economically stable Mexico that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s was as much the product of forced labor as intricate cultural interactions.

In the immediate postrevolutionary period, bureaucrats and intellectuals often debated the line between consensual communal work (also called *faena*, *fagina*, *tequio*, and *cuatequitl*) and coerced labor. According to the revolutionary Constitution of 1917, the former was admissible while the latter was banned. As a result, supporters of the practice, like the Zapotitlán Lagunas mayor, often stressed that villagers offered their services voluntarily. Thus, in the early 1920s, the Sierra de Puebla's military commander reported that the local communities built the required roads with such "overwhelming enthusiasm," the national government only needed to supply "technical advice and equipment." Even equipment was not really needed: "there is already much in the Sierra," and workers were happy to use their own picks and shovels.⁶ A handful of visiting anthropologists were similarly enthused. For Robert Redfield, who lived in the Morelos village of Tepoztlán during the late 1920s, *cuatequitl* (another term for communal labor) was a pre-Hispanic tradition that carried with it a common moral obligation and "was not lightly denied."⁷ For Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, villagers undertook collective work "with a fiesta spirit, an atmosphere of social sharing between the members of a lineage, a barrio or an entire community." It "reinforce[d] solidarity" and had "social, symbolic and entertainment functions as well as purely economic ones."⁸

But many Mexicans, like the refuseniks of Zapotitlán Lagunas, were less enthusiastic. Instead they emphasized the coerced nature of much of the labor, which they held to run contrary to the emancipatory promises of the revolution. In 1941, for example, the head of Oaxaca's Department of Indigenous Affairs called communal work "a regime of slavery," in which "peasants are forced to lend their services against their will and without remuneration as messengers, shepherds, and beasts of burdens to authorities and private companies. . . . They deny it is slavery and instead call it '*tequio*' [the name for communal labor in Oaxaca]."⁹ Urban intellectuals, who made brief trips out to the countryside, were also horrified. One broadsheet

journalist called the communal labor of Guerrero's Costa Chica "a slavery like that of the colony."¹⁰ And a handful of anthropologists such as Oscar Lewis, who lived in Tepoztlán two decades later than Redfield, were similarly unenthusiastic. Lewis viewed *cuatequiltl* as the colonial bastardization of a pre-Hispanic practice, "a coercive rather than a voluntary institution," which predominantly fell on the poor as they had "little political influence and a greater fear of the authorities." In fact, villagers so resented the custom that children taunted each other with the refrain, "Unless you do this, I will give you *cuatequiltl*."¹¹

As the Zapotitlán Lagunas situation suggests, at the local level, the imposition of communal labor had even more disruptive effects. Intellectual debate was one thing; being forced from one's bed at gunpoint and obliged to build a road for free was another. As we shall see, the line between communal and forced labor exposed the paradoxes of postrevolutionary state formation in three distinct ways. First, it showed the disjunction between the state's modernization projects and its inability to collect sufficient taxes to fund these plans.¹² As even its supporters argued, communal labor allowed Mexican elites to build roads, irrigation canals, and schools on the cheap. Second, it revealed the gap between the government's aspirations for political control and Mexican villages' tradition of political autonomy, which had, in part, motivated many to join the revolution.¹³ In theory, all participants were meant to consent to communal labor. But what did this mean in practice? Did people agree through participatory democracy, at a public meeting and with show of hands? Or did they have to obey by the rules of representative democracy and obey the commands of an elected town mayor or a faraway governor?¹⁴ And what if people refused? Did the authorities have the right to force labor on the in-compliant? Finally, it also exposed the conflict between the revolutionary regime's promises of economic redistribution and its maintenance of a capitalist economy. Labor projects were held to offer "communal benefits," but were these benefits distributed evenly throughout communities? Many believed they were not. Protestors complained that roads, in particular, struck at the redistributive aims of the revolution. In fact, they exacerbated economic inequality by offering those with large agricultural properties access to expanded markets and those with capital the opportunity to monopolize transport routes.

As communal labor exposed these fiscal, political, and redistributive contradictions, it generated ample opposition. Villagers not only wrote complaints; they took to the streets to protest their in-conformity, voted out or ejected exacting local authorities, adopted go-slow

policies, and, most often, refused to work. Throughout Mexico, authorities sought diverse solutions. Many simply used force, employing local police, judicial authorities, and nearby military detachments to force reluctant villagers to work. But others attempted more negotiated resolutions. Some reinserted participatory democracy into the system of representative government, establishing irregular village meetings where mass voting would decide on communal labor projects. Others tried economic concessions, persuading villagers to build roads in exchange for offers of jobs or land. Others still retreated, rerouting roads and irrigation channels around population centers that refused to offer their labor.

In order to examine the effects of the postrevolutionary state's employment of communal labor, I have divided this chapter into four sections. In the first, I offer a historical overview of the uses and abuses of communal labor up to the revolution. In the second, I use a handful of academic studies and more than one hundred complaints about the exploitation of communal work sent to Mexico's presidents from villages throughout the republic. These not only map out the chronology, geography, and local dynamics of exploitation but also reveal how the continuation of communal labor accentuated the paradoxes mentioned above. Third, I focus on struggles over the construction of roads, which accounted for the vast majority of peasant complaints. And finally, I look at ways in which the authorities used both force and negotiation in order to impose these labor regimes.

A Brief History of Communal Labor

Throughout the twentieth century, defenders of communal labor regularly pointed to the custom's pre-Hispanic roots.¹⁵ But the ambit and aim of communal labor changed dramatically over time. And, if postrevolutionary tensions over the practice were particularly virulent, they were nothing new. For centuries, the use and abuse of communal labor had exposed anxieties over political control, social hierarchy, and race. During the nineteenth century, the practice became particularly politicized. Postindependence villages redefined communal labor to include former nobles and refocused work on immediate needs. Midcentury liberals redefined the practice yet again, banning personal services, extending labor to include nonindigenous groups, and curtailing its use to fulfill church tasks. And Porfirian elites, especially in the heavily indigenous states of Chiapas and Yucatán, co-opted the custom to provide labor for the expansion of capitalist, export agriculture.

Villagers had used communal labor to perform certain tasks since pre-Hispanic times. Nahua, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya communities had banded together to harvest crops, build irrigation canals, carve out and clear paths, clean ceremonial centers, and do piecemeal artisanal work for their lords for centuries.¹⁶ A strong moral code enforced these labors. For one of Spanish chronicler Bernardino Sahagun's informers, "the good man" was "a worker, a sage, a willing worker—one who works willingly." The "bad man" was "uncooperative, irresponsible, impetuous, he works without consideration." And, at least according to post-Conquest sources, such collective work was undertaken voluntarily: "In the old days they performed their communal labor in their own towns. . . . They did their work together and with much merriment, for they are people who do little work alone, but together they accomplish something."¹⁷

The Spanish Conquest not only changed the social hierarchy but also shifted the process and aims of collective labor. Spaniards now harnessed communal toil to their own *repartimiento* system, a rotating scheme of draft labor designed to balance out the declining indigenous work force. Spanish-legitimated governors rather than the traditional ruling houses now decided on who would work. Peasants now worked under Hispanic employers or foreman. And the tasks were more "Hispanic in nature."¹⁸ They included the construction and cleaning of Catholic temples, and the production of goods and materials to be sold on the market in Spanish cities.

In Mexico, *repartimiento* declined. But local elites continued to use communal labor. Elites in the main towns or *cabeceras* ordered men and women from small subject villages or *sujetos* to perform multiple tasks, including the collection of charcoal, the cleaning of central squares, and even the cooking of meals.¹⁹ Like their pre-Hispanic forebears, indigenous nobles or caciques demanded that commoners provide both general and personal services. In the Oaxaca village of Cuyotepeji, in 1783 peasants claimed that the cacique requested not only thirty bushels of maize, beans, and chili but also "two Indian servants for his house and a woman to grind the corn."²⁰ Such duties were broadly accepted. They formed part of a moral economy. Governors and caciques were entrusted with protecting villages, securing outside aid, and administering justice fairly.²¹ They also formed part of the indigenous village cargo system; each male community member was expected to perform such tasks in order to climb the village's political hierarchy.²²

But increasingly such duties could also cause tensions. Many peasants resented more Hispanicized nobles using communal labor in order to profit off expanding markets for consumer

goods. In the 1770s, villagers repeatedly complained about the female noble or *cacica* of Ihualtepec (Oaxaca), who demanded four Indians to work as textile workers and domestic servants in her house each week. Villagers were also forced to travel on their own dime “to distant lands” to sell her merchandise. In contrast, declining noble families begrudged doing communal labor at all.²³ Juan López of the Oaxaca Sierra village of Santa María Yabichui complained that by forcing him to fetch fodder for the priest’s horse, villagers “wanted to treat me as a commoner, usurping the privileges acquired by my forefathers.”²⁴

After independence, communal labor transformed. As politicians banned hereditary distinctions, the personal services demanded by caciques disappeared. At the same time, remaining communal duties became more democratic. Former nobles were drafted into villages’ work forces.²⁵ And communal labor focused on small-scale, communitarian tasks, including harvesting crops, cleaning the streets, clearing irrigation channels, and building and maintaining local churches and chapels. In fact, in many regions, religious works seem to have comprised the bulk of the major tasks.²⁶ For example, between 1821 and 1867 around a third of the northern Oaxaca district of Huajuapán’s villages built churches. At the same time, they constructed thirteen sturdy houses for priests. These were all built through communal labor.²⁷ In 1845 the authorities of Miltepec (Oaxaca) started to construct a church around their miraculous image of a crucified Christ. The work not only “concentrated the desires of diverse classes”; some even came to work on their free days. And by appeasing the village saint, the work had brought “further benefits,” reducing small-scale crime and increasing attendance at Mass.²⁸

The ascendance of Mexico’s liberals during the 1850s shifted communal labor yet again. Like their revolutionary descendants, many liberals viewed the practice as a colonial hangover. Article 12 of the 1857 constitution explicitly prohibited the imposition of personal services on citizens without fair compensation and consent. Specific prohibitions varied from region to region. But many states were relatively strict, especially on the matter of the church’s use of communal labor. The 1861 Puebla constitution outlawed all public officials from demanding services without remuneration and abolished the village office of *topil* or bailiff, the person normally responsible for handing out communal tasks. Traditional communal jobs like messengers, sacristans, and bell ringers were banned. But some services were still allowed, including community policing, the clearing of paths, and those services “required for common benefit and security.” This clause permitted the use of communal labor for the construction and

maintenance of roads, schools, and public buildings. Finally, in Puebla at least, nonindigenous villagers were commanded to perform these communal tasks. At first these reforms were extremely popular. Less pious villagers could now take exacting priests to court. In 1862 Puebla's civil court forbade the priest of Xalacapan (Puebla) from demanding that villagers construct him a new corral. And populist caciques, like Juan Francisco Lucas, employed the new measures to drum up support in indigenous villages by shanghaiing snooty mestizo elites to work on roads, bridges, and schools.²⁹

But during the Porfiriato, the more exploitative use of communal labor returned. Porfirio Díaz's cash-strapped unelected regional chiefs, the *jefes políticos*, led the way. They viewed the custom as a cheap means to rebuild post-civil war Mexico. In the 1870s, Manuel Arriaga, the chief of Zacapoaxtla (Puebla), refused to listen to complaints about the constitutional abolition of the practice. Instead he reimposed communal labor as a means to construct roads, town halls, and schools.³⁰ The practice often bled into prohibited personal services. In Caxhuacan (Puebla), the mayor ordered villagers to build a new main square. To do so, villagers were forced to demolish the houses of two mestizo residents and erect replacements in their stead.³¹ In Yucatán, *jefes políticos* also redirected the custom, using their "vast discretionary power over lives" to deploy peasants to build roads, clean plazas, and dredge the waters of rivers.³² And in regions of expanding export crops like coffee, timber, and rubber, *jefes políticos* used communal labor to provide workers for unpaid agricultural work. In San Bartolomé (Chiapas), political authorities threatened villagers with conscription, confiscated their tools so they could not work on their own projects, and forced them to work unpaid for two weeks at nearby fincas.³³ In Zimatlán (Oaxaca), Zapotec villagers were forced to work one day for free at the hacienda of San Nicolás.³⁴ This refocusing of communal labor toward capitalist agriculture reimposed the practice's racial implications. By the end of the nineteenth century, mestizo elites used the custom of communal labor to exploit indigenous groups.

Communal Labor in Postrevolutionary Mexico

During the revolution, indigenous peasants took advantage of the breakdown of political control to slough off communal labor. In the Sierra Norte de Puebla, liberated villagers even stopped clearing water channels and nearby paths.³⁵ And in 1917 revolutionaries restated the old 1857 regulations regarding the practice. Article 5 prohibited personal services "without just retribution

and full consent.” The only exceptions were jury service, conscription, electoral office, and council work. Despite these rules, in postrevolutionary Mexico, much communal labor continued to be forced. Between 1934 and 1958, villagers sent more than one hundred letters and telegrams, which complained to successive Mexican presidents about local authorities continuing to use the practice without consent or remuneration.

These were the tip of the iceberg. Many indigenous Mexicans were unable to speak Spanish, let alone compose a letter of grievance. And many complaints never reached higher than the municipal authorities, the local deputy, or the state governor. My own work in Oaxaca indicates that the forcible imposition of communal labor for certain projects was prevalent and widely begrudged. And oral testimonies back this up. Frans Schryer found that in Hidalgo, Nahua peasants “bitterly resented [the] obligatory labor as well as the onerous duty of serving as messengers or couriers, even if they had done so once or twice in their life.”³⁶ Florencio Cruz Cruz, a Zapotec peasant from the Sierra Juárez, remembered how three days of backbreaking labor on the Villa Alta–Oaxaca City road persuaded him to leave his village and flee to the comparative sanctuary of the local teacher training college.³⁷

Despite the evidence’s limitations, at the most basic level, these complaints suggest the geography of communal labor: the coercion of communal labor still fell most heavily on the country’s indigenous population. Of the complaints, 68 percent came from the six southern states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, Tabasco, and Veracruz (figure 1). These states all contained high proportions of indigenous groups. In 1940 Chiapas, Puebla, and Oaxaca alone contained more than half the country’s monolingual indigenous adults. Other specific regions, which produced ample complaints, also comprised large indigenous groups. During the 1940s, Huasteco communities in the San Luis Potosí sierra made six complaints, which varied from the imposition of policing duties to forced labor on landowners’ estates. A handful of explicit references back this up. In 1938 Marín Santiago of Tzicuilan (Puebla) complained that local authorities forced “exploited Indians” to work on bridge construction without pay.³⁸ A year later, Marcelino Santos protested that the “Indians and villagers” of El Bosque (Chiapas) were forced to work from 4:00 a.m. to dusk on the construction of a new road. Some were paid a risible amount, but most received nothing. “Threats, insults, and bad treatment” were frequent. And if villagers refused, local policemen hauled them from their beds and forced them to work.³⁹

Figure 1. Complaints over communal labor by state, 1934–1958

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But not all complaints over communal labor came from remote, indigenous regions. In fact, a handful of urban authorities also tried to impose the practice on unwilling citizens. In 1941 Tomás Valencia from the Mexico City barrio of Tlalpan complained that the capital's authorities had forced poor locals to work on diverse construction projects for free.⁴⁰ Three years later, the men and women of San Miguel Ajusco, a village just outside Tlalpan, made a similar complaint, arguing that Mexico City representatives had tried to coerce them to work on the new water system running into the capital.⁴¹

These complaints also suggest the chronology of coerced communal labor (figure 2). During the presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Avila Camacho, 70 percent of the complaints were made. Cárdenas's presidency, in particular, has often been viewed as the high point of the state's redistributive policies. But, like that of his successor, his term also combined a state-led drive for infrastructure construction with low tax income. And many authorities viewed unpaid communal labor as the sole means to get jobs done. These presidencies also experienced ongoing tensions over church-state relations. As we shall see, a handful of complaints exposed rural divisions between those who saw communal labor as a means to fulfill religious obligations and those who saw the practice as a way to provide secular schools, playing fields, and teachers' houses. During Miguel Alemán's tenure, complaints declined. There is some logic to this. Alemán often stressed that the country had reached the "constructive phase" of the revolution, and per capita spending on infrastructure did increase dramatically during the period.⁴² But this also may be a statistical anomaly. There are no complaints from 1947 to 1950, which suggests gaps in the archival record rather than an effective program to wipe out the practice.⁴³ Complaints during Adolfo Ruiz Cortines's presidency were also relatively low. As I shall suggest, by this period national, state, and local governments had instituted means to dampen popular resentment over coerced communal labor.

Figure 2. Complaints over communal labor by president, 1934–1958

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The complaints also indicate those responsible for imposing unpopular communal labor (figure 3). In 80 percent of cases, protestors blamed municipal governments explicitly. In theory, all adult males (and after 1947 all adult females as well) were allowed to take part in municipal votes. This was classic, representative democracy. These elections were designed to offer

authorities a popular remit to impose communal labor as they saw fit. Election implied popular consent. But often, legal regulations over elections were not strictly applied. Governors, deputies, and caciques regularly imposed their own candidates, by scamming or by ignoring the popular vote.⁴⁴ And even when villagers elected the authorities by a fair majority, certain socioeconomic, ethnic, or geographically separate minorities resisted municipal control. Here, participatory democracy and traditions of horizontal decision-making clashed against the vertical expectations of representative government. Small minorities simply refused to do the work agreed upon by village majorities.

Figure 3. Complaints over communal labor, by those held responsible, 1934–1958
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But not all complaints focused on municipal governments. Other state authorities also imposed coerced communal work. In eight cases, local military leaders shanghaied locals to build roads or construct barracks. As Thomas Rath argues, during the postrevolutionary period, the Mexican military effectively acted as a rural police force; 20 percent of municipalities contained small military detachments.⁴⁵ These were isolated, underfunded, and under little local support. They were often also led by military commanders, who sought to use their position to secure private incomes. As a result, they regularly used armed force to compel rural villagers to complete works either on behalf of the government or for their own benefit. In 1943 the villagers of Zacacuautla (Hidalgo) complained that the military chief of the unit based in Honey (Puebla) forced locals to collect fodder for his horses and do unpaid work on the Mexico City–Tuxpan road. To ensure compliance, he set up a machine gun by the side of the road and ordered his men to shoot anyone who left. Discontent spread and at one meeting, a local man, Abraham Vargas, stood up to complain. Although he was “one-eyed and one-armed,” the chief—Fortino Ortiz—took out his pistol and shot him dead. His soldiers then opened fire, killing three peasants and injuring another five.⁴⁶ In 1944 the commander of Ciudad Ixtepec (Oaxaca) was similarly exacting. He not only claimed Germany was going to win the war but also forced villagers to hang a soldier for drinking, rob railway runners, and “work like slaves on the Salina Cruz road.” He demanded that each worker cart 150 wheelbarrows of dirt to the construction each day.⁴⁷

Finally, the complaints reveal the types of communal labor that postrevolutionary Mexicans opposed. As the historical overview suggests, communal labor could apply to a wide range of activities. At the most acceptable end were small-scale traditional efforts with

immediate, visible, economic benefits. In rural Mexico, neighbors continued to practice communal harvests and the clearing of local irrigation canals and paths. As Oscar Lewis witnessed, they did so without complaint.⁴⁸ But other practices were more controversial. In a handful of cases, villagers complained about lending their free labor to staff the local police. In 1945, for example, locals from San Martín Coyoc (Puebla) complained that the municipal president forced them to spend their nights on police patrols without remuneration. The president had written up the old custom as a municipal duty, but as the villagers pointed out, it was still unconstitutional.⁴⁹ Rural villagers also occasionally complained about erecting new municipal buildings. In 1941 villagers from Tzicuilan protested that the municipal president of Cuetzalan (Puebla) forced them to work every Monday “like beasts of burden” on the construction of the town hall. If they refused, municipal police arrived, knocked down their doors, dragged them to prison, and imposed a peso fine.⁵⁰

During the first two decades after the revolution, controversies over the use of communal labor also exposed divisions over church–state relations.⁵¹ In more Catholic towns, municipal authorities regularly teamed up with priests and lay church leaders to demand villagers voluntarily commit labor to projects that benefited the church. These were traditions going back centuries. But now anticlerical locals, encouraged by the state’s opposition to the church, complained about fulfilling these works. In 1937 the villagers of Tlapexco (Morelos) complained that the mayor and the local priest both demanded that they build a road to the sanctuary of Zacualpilla. The road was designed to increase traffic to the annual fiesta. But, as the protestors, argued, it was not “of public utility” but simply increased the coffers of the church and a handful of rich merchants.⁵² Four years later, the peasants of Pinotepa Nacional on the Oaxaca Coast complained that the municipal authorities, the landowners, and the local priest continued to appoint pliant indigenous men as “*mandones*,” who were charged with forcing other indigenous locals to rebuild, repair, and clean the town’s churches.⁵³

In other regions, authorities employed communal labor to build schools. During the 1930s, when many Catholics still held the state policy of socialist education to be impious and even atheist, this could also cause conflict.⁵⁴ In 1936 the villagers of Churumuco (Michoacán) complained that the municipal president and the local teacher demanded that they construct the local school. They argued that this was unnecessary; they already had a small, Catholic establishment.⁵⁵ In 1937 the villagers of Techimal (Hidalgo) made a similar complaint. They

claimed that they appreciated the authorities had established an indigenous boarding school in the village, but they complained that authorities and teachers were forcing them to build the school themselves. They were working ten to twelve hours and paid only twenty-five to thirty centavos a day.⁵⁶

But protests over providing police services and building town halls, schools, and temples comprised only 10 percent of complaints. As I have suggested, these records represented only a small minority of actual conflicts. In remote, indigenous regions, in-depth research reveals that caciques in particular used the imposition of communal labor to dominate or punish certain groups. In Hidalgo, Juvencio Nochebuena used the collective labor of Nahua communities to work on his own fields and farms. (His sons, somewhat naïvely, thought Indians liked him so much they came “to work for him for free.”)⁵⁷ In the Huasteca region, Gonzalo Santos did the same.⁵⁸ And in Oaxaca’s Región Mixe, Luis Rodríguez also demanded municipal presidents provide indigenous workers for free labor at his beck and call. In a series of letters to the municipal president of Tlahuitoltepec (Oaxaca), he demanded what he termed “mozos” or servants to deliver messages; clean roads, squares, and public buildings; build schools; tend to his own coffee plantations; carry coffee; and even form musical bands and basketball teams.⁵⁹ In fact, in 1938 more than half the population of the Mixe village of Mazatlán ran away to live in the mountains and escape Rodríguez’s demands. They complained that his local representative had used the cacique’s gunmen to force all the community to carry concrete from the distant town of Matias Romero to build the local school.⁶⁰

These examples are difficult to track down. In some regions, they were clearly relatively common. But evidence remains locked away in dusty municipal archives or in the memories of the victims. And, in general, outside remote indigenous areas, communal labor toward these ends was broadly agreed upon, or divvied up, in a manner that excluded groups that refused to work. National or state ministries of education often dealt directly with conflicts over school construction, and, during the 1930s, villages that refused to build educational establishments simply did not get schools.⁶¹

Roads and Communal Labor

The vast majority (90 percent) of complaints over the coercion of communal labor concerned the construction of roads. During the postrevolutionary period, successive governments, whatever

their political leanings, united over their support for road construction. As early as 1918, President Venustiano Carranza announced that “highways deserve special attention. . . . It is absolutely necessary that the country has a complete road network.”⁶² During the 1930s, left-wing president Lázaro Cárdenas agreed, arguing that roads allowed newly liberated *ejidatarios* to sell their crops on the cash market.⁶³ And a decade later, so did right-wing president Miguel Alemán. During the 1940s, officials claimed that roads would allow large commercial farmers and industrialists to sell their goods in the country’s rapidly expanding cities or even abroad.⁶⁴ Such concerted efforts generated impressive results. Between 1930 and 1940, Mexico’s road network increased from 1,435 kilometers to 9,929. In the following decade, it doubled to 21,422 kilometers. And in 1960 roads extended to 45,089 kilometers. The number of road vehicles also increased from fewer than 100,000 in 1930 to 802,650 in 1960.⁶⁵

Bare statistics, however, fail to reveal the mechanics of road building at the local level. Financing road construction was a combined effort. The federal government offered considerable cash. In fact, in 1949 money for transportation and communications reached a peak of 30.7 percent of the national budget.⁶⁶ But such support was not enough. State and local governments were also expected to chip in. But during the postrevolutionary period, local tax revenues struggled to keep up. Land distribution and regulations protecting *ejidatarios* from overtaxing cut into property taxes. The centralization of industrial and commercial taxes reduced levies still further. And tax evasion and antitax protests kept revenues low. Between 1910 and 1949, federal taxes increased sevenfold, state taxes only threefold, and municipal taxes by barely 50 percent. By the 1960s, federal income dwarfed state and municipal incomes. Under Adolfo López Mateos, municipalities received just 3 percent of total contributions.⁶⁷

Low fiscal revenues shaped local approaches to road building. And especially in rural, indigenous areas, authorities used free communal labor to save cash. These generated considerable disagreements. Most conflicts hinged on the matter of consent. Rural refuseniks repeatedly argued that they had never agreed to do the work. In politically divided regions, struggles were particularly intense. For example, during the 1920s, Sierra cacique Gabriel Barrios Cabrera and the town of Zacapoaxtla (Puebla) were in constant dispute. When Barrios Cabrera tried to persuade locals to use communal labor on the Zaragoza–Tecolutla road project, villagers flatly refused. And when he sent in gunmen to enforce the policy, Cuetzalan’s villagers complained that they had never consented to the project and asked the government to end “the

exploitation experienced by our people since the time of the conquest.”⁶⁸

During the 1950s, in the Morelos village of Tetela, conflicts were also frequent. Here, the village was divided into two political groups. One wanted to construct a local market, the other a bridge and road. When the pro-road group tried to force one hundred men to perform communal labor on the project, the pro-market group rebelled. Three died in the resulting shootout.⁶⁹ In the northern Oaxaca district of Huajuapán, conflicts over road building also overlaid political divisions. From the 1940s onward, villages or individuals that voted for the opposition party, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party), repeatedly complained that they were targeted for communal work on road-building projects.⁷⁰ In the 1950, the pro-PAN locals of Tequixtepec even claimed that the district military commander had forced them to work on the Tehuacán–Huajuapán road but had also deliberately deviated the route so as to avoid benefiting their village.⁷¹

Conflicts over consent also intersected with divisions between municipal head towns or cabeceras and small, subject villages called *rancherías* or *agencias*. These not only pitted influential powerbrokers against small, politically weak hamlets but also often cut across racial divisions. Most municipal authorities were mestizo while in the south especially *agencias* were more likely to be predominantly indigenous. In 1935 José P. Avila of Barrio del Carmen (Oaxaca) complained that the municipal authorities of Silacayoapan (Oaxaca) were forcing all the *agencia*'s men to work on the road rather than harvest their crops.⁷² A year later, the villagers of the small *ranchería* of Arena (Oaxaca) protested that the municipal authorities of Lalana (Oaxaca) had imposed a mestizo outsider as the *ranchería*'s municipal representative. He was now coercing locals to build the Lalana–Choapan road.⁷³ In Yalálag (Oaxaca) during the 1930s, anthropologist Julio de la Fuente observed that villagers looked on communal labor with “repugnance and hostility . . . when it was not ordered by the pueblo authorities but by outsiders.” Conflicts peaked in 1935 when the cabecera demanded that the villagers help construct the Villa Alta–Oaxaca City road. De la Fuente claimed that in Villa Alta (Oaxaca), the locals derided the Yalálag workers and called them the “slaves of Villa Alta.”⁷⁴

If some conflicts centered on matters of consent, others focused on the route's economic benefit. During the postrevolutionary period, left-wing politicians often extolled the equalizing potential of roads. In 1928 Veracruz governor Adalberto Tejeda argued that roads “dissolved monopolies and capitalist exploitation and gave back to the community more than they paid in

taxes to construct them.”⁷⁵ In some cases, this may have been the case. But, in general, it was not. And constructing a road from a municipal center to a market hub failed to distribute payback uniformly. Rich locals often provided the buses and trucks, which poor locals had to pay for; they also put traditional mule drivers out of business.⁷⁶ As markets expanded, large landowners, not small subsistence farmers, made the greatest gains. And faraway villages profited less than those close to the new road. Many Mexicans were well aware of these potential inequalities. They made quick fag-packet calculations and decided that offering their labor to build a road rather than using it to harvest more crops or focus on other economic activities was simply not worth it.

For example, in 1945 the villagers of La Victoria (Veracruz) complained that the municipal government was forcing them to work on the road to the petrol hub of Poza Rica for free. They acknowledged that the road would open up new sources of jobs, but long-term prospects would not satisfy short-term needs: “We do not believe it is just that we have to submit to inquisitorial work without any remuneration that will help our families that are in a precarious situation.”⁷⁷ In 1953 Pedro Martinez protested that for five years, the municipal authorities of Zumpahuacan (State of Mexico) had forced the villagers of Aguacingo to work on the Tenancingo–Zumpahuacan road. If they refused to work, they were threatened with death. Yet for Aguacingo residents, the highway was unusable. They lived on the other side of the valley, a full day’s walk from the start of the road.⁷⁸ Three years later, the villagers of Sánchez Magallanes (Tabasco) complained that the municipal authorities were forcing them to repair and clean the nearby road to Cuauhtemotzín. As they explained, villagers never used the road; they were subsistence farmers. Instead, most traffic consisted of Pemex oil trucks.⁷⁹ In the same year, the villagers of Xamatipan (Veracruz) made a similar complaint. Municipal authorities had ordered them to spend their faenas building a road from the cabecera to a nearby market town. As they explained, for them, the road was useless. Rains had washed away the bridges between their own village and the cabecera. They could not get to the road, even if they wanted to. Rebuilding the bridges was a more profitable use of their labor.⁸⁰

As wage labor increased, the loss of potential cash income also shaped peasants’ attitudes toward this type of communal work. Living on the edge meant many instinctively understood marginal rates of return. In 1955 the ejidatarios of San José Providencia (Puebla) grumbled that the local authorities were forcing them to offer free labor to build the municipal road. If they

refused, they were thrown in jail and fined. As they explained, they were “poor, very poor.” Working every day, they barely managed to feed their dependents. Unpaid labor, days in prison, and fines made life financially impossible.⁸¹ Two years later Ascención Granada and fifteen other villagers from San José Iturbide (Guanajuato) made a similar complaint. They protested that the municipal president had ordered them to help build the road from their agencia to the municipality. They admitted that the route had long-term advantages, but three days of unpaid communal labor lost workers nine pesos per week. They simply could not afford to sustain their families.⁸²

Force and Negotiation

Opposition to the use of communal labor for road building was extremely widespread, and local authorities sought a wide array of solutions. The most frequent was brute force. A handful of town chiefs allied with nearby military commanders to dragoon workers. In 1942 the mayor of La Unión (Guerrero) helped local soldiers track down suspected bandits. In return, the commander arrested vagrants and loiterers and put them to work cleaning and repairing the local roads.⁸³ But most used state or municipal police. These could preempt labor needs by periodically arresting villagers and forcing them to work. In 1949 in Teloloapan (Guerrero), every Sunday the police jailed fifteen people, who would work off their crime by toiling on the local pipeline for the next five days.⁸⁴ They could break into houses, turf people out of bed, and frog-march them to the roads like they did in Zapotitlán Lagunas and El Bosque in 1939 or Tzicuilan and Acatlán (Puebla) in 1942.⁸⁵ They could provide armed guards for reluctant workers. In 1946 more than three hundred San Luis Potosí ejidatarios complained that the municipal president of Coxcatlán (Puebla) not only shook them down for cash but also forced them to work for free on cross-country roads and on his own maize and sugar cane fields. When a handful protested, nearby police shot five dead.⁸⁶

They could also lock refuseniks in jail. In 1941 police in Tecamatlán (Puebla) arrested three men for allegedly refusing to do communal work. At least two claimed they were sick.⁸⁷ As one villager from Pachivia (Guerrero) remembered, “The school, the town hall, the church, the electricity . . . if you don’t cooperate you’ll go to jail, if you don’t cooperate for the school, for the church, you’ll go to jail, and with a good thrashing.”⁸⁸ Finally, they could impose fines. These varied from place to place. In Tzicuilan in 1942, the fine was one peso; in Zitacuaro

(Michoacán) in 1958, it was five pesos; and in Coxcatlán in 1946, it was a punitive twenty-five pesos.⁸⁹

Occasionally unwilling workers tried to bypass municipal police forces and bring in state arbiters. But this seldom worked. In 1957 in San José Iturbide, they requested the state prosecutor intervene in the dispute about communal labor. Instead, the governor sent the judicial police. After signing what they thought was their statement of complaint, the head of the judicial police revealed that the forced laborers had actually signed a promise to work: “Now you’ve really fucked yourselves and there’s no way out, you’ll have to work for Don Moises [the municipal president] and if you don’t, we’ll send you to Granaditas [a colloquial term for jail] and there we will hang you.” Having sorted out the matter, the police chief went off to drink with the mayor.⁹⁰

But not all local authorities used force. Officials also sought negotiated settlements. Some sought to ameliorate the economic losses of free laborers. If possible, they started to pay road-building villagers. Often they used food, alcohol, and cigarettes. The head of the work draft in El Potrero (Guerrero) always managed to find willing workers. “I did not forget,” he claimed, “to bring picnics, and mescal, cigarettes, the people carried all [the telegraph poles] for me.”⁹¹ Oscar Lewis observed that one feature of collective labor in Tepoztlán was “the free use of drink”: “It would seem that the Tepoztecs need the stimulus of drink to enable them to work together successfully.”⁹² Others used the offer of free road-building equipment. During the 1920s, the governor of Veracruz offered peasants of Las Vigas the picks and shovels needed to build the nearby road.⁹³

But some also started to pay the cash. In 1944 the government of Chiapas claimed that it had ordered villages working on the Pichucalco road to “pay workers retribution according to the law.”⁹⁴ As municipal finances were so low, this often involved moving around government money. In Hidalgo, the state government gave municipalities a share in the tobacco tax to pay for peasant labor. In Oaxaca, the authorities of Ralu’a repeatedly sought government funds. In 1950 the village’s road lobby visited Oaxaca City on at least twenty occasions. But in 1953, their efforts bore fruit. They received 525,000 pesos from the Papaloapan Dam Commission to pay village workers and finish the proposed road. If government cash was low, they collected donations in an ad hoc fashion. In Ralu’a they complemented government funds with donations from the region’s rich merchants.⁹⁵ In Amatlán (Veracruz) they collected fifty centavos from

each car that used the bumpy dirt-track road. The money eventually paid for the paving of the route.⁹⁶

Other authorities tried to overcome the political objections to communal labor. State governments repeatedly ordered mayors to convince rather than force their villagers to work for free. In 1949 the governor of Oaxaca, Eduardo Vasconcelos, urged municipal authorities in Choapan (Oaxaca) to avoid conflicts by “persuad[ing] villagers of the significance of these works.”⁹⁷ And municipal chiefs often pleaded that they had used persuasion to get people to work. In 1940 the mayor of Zapotitlán Lagunas argued that he had never coerced locals to toil but rather used “legal convincing,” “calling attention to the importance of this particular matter.” As a result, most villagers, inspired by his dreams of a modern future, “offered their labor with good will.”⁹⁸

But often persuasion was not enough. Some villages introduced ad hoc strategies of participatory democracy to gain citizens’ full consent. These often trumped the legal framework of representative government. In San José de Gracia (Michoacán), municipal presidents rarely imposed communal work. If they did, they risked the sack. Locals dubbed one particularly enthusiastic president Uruchurtu after the modernizing Mexico City chief and threw him out after six months. Smart presidents relied instead on irregular “public assemblies” to test the village mood. These were convoked by the local priest, held on the patio of a local school, involved ample debate, and decided on the object of communal work through a show of hands. In 1967 locals decided to back the construction of a drinkable water system and a new secondary school. The municipal president then set about organizing the labor draft.⁹⁹

During the 1950s, Ruiz Cortines attempted to impose a new institution that could fulfill this role. Municipal governments were asked to set up Boards of Material Improvements. These were private-public institutions, designed to take decision-making out of the hands of local mayors and raise money for village developments. Some were complete disasters. They became “party political organizations” or were hijacked by local entrepreneurs. Outside the fishing port of Enseñada (Baja California Norte), rich peasants used matching government funds to build a tavern, with the result that “drunkards hung around the bar molesting passing women and bringing scandal to the village.”¹⁰⁰ But others were more successful. Savvy local leaders would use the boards to measure public opinion, choose popular projects, and gain official backing. In San Luis Potosí, during Salvador Nava’s brief stint as mayor, he established boards in every

barrio. Citizens worked together to pave roads and introduce electricity lines and drainage pipes.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) incentivized good governance. Aspirant politicians who had run boards successfully and without disruption were put at the head of the list of potential PRI candidates. By the 1960s, 15 percent of Mexican mayors had previous experience on these infrastructure organizations.¹⁰²

Conclusion

During the postrevolutionary era, communal labor, like land reform and education, was a highly controversial issue. State funds were low; demands for infrastructure projects were high. In many rural areas, especially in the south, local governments imposed communal labor by force. Violence, imprisonment, fines, and threats shaped Mexico's network of roads, in particular. Many villagers looked back on the era of the labor draft with considerable resentment. At the time, such strategies also generated conflict. Many villagers complained that they had not consented to provide such labor. Others complained that the projects provided little economic benefit. But, gradually, forced use of free labor seems to have declined. Funding for cash pay sometimes trickled down. In other regions, state or local governments attempted to use persuasion to gain locals' consent. In fact, by the 1960s, shifting demographic patterns had changed the meaning of communal labor yet again. As rural Mexicans moved en masse into the expanding cities, they reconfigured the practice. In the urban squatter communities of midcentury Mexico, ad hoc urban committees used the rural tradition to provide paved roads, electricity lines, drainage, and schools.¹⁰³

1 I would like to thank Elizabeth O'Brien for acting as my research assistant for this chapter. I would also like to thank Ben Fallaw and Paul Gillingham for their insights on this chapter.

2 Mateo Moran to President Cárdenas, March 28, 1939; Cipriano Valencia to President Cárdenas, January 4, 1940, both in Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Presidente Lázaro Cárdenas del Rio (hereafter LCR), 540/68. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. **{AU: Are 540/68 folder or box or sheet numbers? If so, can you identify them as such, e.g. caja 540, leg. (or exp. or fs.) 68? Pls. make that sort of clarification for all archival citations.}**

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- 4 Luis Aboites Aguilar, *Excepciones y privilegios: Modernización tributaria y centralización en México, 1922–1972* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2003); María Antonia Martínez, *El despegue constructivo de la Revolución: Sociedad y política en el alemanismo* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2004); Wendy Waters, “Re-mapping the Nation: Road-building as State Formation in Post-revolutionary Mexico, 1925–1940” (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 1999); Michael Bess, “Routes of Compromise: Building Roads and Shaping the Nation in Postrevolutionary Mexico” (manuscript in author’s possession, n.d.).
- 5 Alan Knight and Wil Pansters, eds., *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2006); Wil Pansters, ed., *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012); Thomas Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Ben Fallaw and Terry Rugeley, eds., *Forced Marches: Soldiers and Military Caciques in Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).
- 6 Keith Brewster, “Caciquismo in Post-revolutionary Mexico: The Case of Gabriel Barrios Cabrera in the Sierra Norte de Puebla” (PhD. diss., University of Warwick, 1995), 186.
- 7 Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlán: A Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 126–27, 146.
- 8 Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 31. {AU: Added to bib.}
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- 13 Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 1:78–170.
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- 55 Ceferino Mateo to President Cárdenas, December 29, 1936, AGN, LCR, 543.3/611.
- 56 Pedro Manuel to President Cárdenas, February 17, 1937, AGN, LCR, 534.5/545.
- 57 Schryer, *Ethnicity and Class Conflict*, 141.
- 58 “Miles de campesinos huyen de la miseria,” *Heraldo de San Luis*, May 10, 1961. {AU: Any author?}
- 59 Luis Rodríguez to Municipal President of Tlahuitoltepec, September 22, 1952, Archivo Municipal de Tlahuitoltepec, caja 1, 1900–1950, Administracion, Correspondencia.
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- 62 Bess, “Routes of Compromise,” chapter 1.
- 63 Bess, “Routes of Compromise,” chapter 3.
- 64 Bess, “Routes of Compromise.”
- 65 Bess, “Routes of Compromise.”
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- 67 Benjamin T. Smith, “Building a State on the Cheap: Taxation, Social Movements, and Politics,” in *Dictalanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968*, ed. Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 255–76.
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- 71 Luis Vasquez to secretario particular del Gobernador, June 9, 1956, Archivo del Municipio de Tequixtepec, Gobernación. {AU: Any box/folder numbers to include? Should secretario be secretaria? And should all words of the title be capitalized, as in the below note?}
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- 81 Ejidatarios of San Jose Provindencia to President Ruiz Cortines, September 5, 1955, AGN, ARC, 542.1/985.
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