

Title: The Mexican Countryside Past and Present
by
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In his canonical analysis of changing urban and rural life-ways since the 16th century in England titled *The City and The Country*, Raymond Williams recalls the original meaning of the *country* as “land spread out over against the observer.” To Williams, the historical reality of the countryside can never be experienced as a whole, for the countryside resists complete observation. But rather the countryside is made visible only in bits and pieces in the light of new kinds of livelihood. Thus, Williams made the cogent observation that it is in changes in social relations that the view of the countryside begins to take on material and knowable dimensions.

At the same time, in what seems like a world apart, archaeologists under the direction of William T. Sanders began an ambitious archaeological program aimed at understanding the evolution of Mesoamerican civilization in Mexico. Their objectives were extraordinary as the work they performed. As outlined by anthropologist Eric R. Wolf, the scope of the work encompassed non other than the complete understanding how environmental factors and cultural adaptation changed in central Mexico through time.¹ The social consequences of cultural change would be made evident in changes in broad scale settlement patterns. This would provide evidence for political evolution, warfare, cultural persistence and become a means to formulate general causal explanations of cultural change over time.² To accomplish this, archaeologists meticulously traversed the countryside around Mexico City in pursuit of settlements and features contemporaneous with ancient Mesoamerica. The storied work of Sanders and colleagues is now considered the gold standard for archaeological fieldwork in Latin America. Between 1967 and 1975, archaeologists walked across hundreds of square kilometers and recorded thousands of different archaeological sites and features.³ The work illuminated a more complex representation of Mesoamerican social life and customs in the Basin of Mexico that scholars of Latin America continue to use to this day.

In a 2015 retrospect about the monumental feat, Jeffery Parsons cites that at the time the Basin of Mexico had ideal conditions for regional survey. Semi-arid climate preserved archaeological remains and increased visibility. Labor intensive agriculture drudged up a plethora of ancient Mesoamerican artifacts. Additionally, urban development was displacing massive amounts of earth making visible the Mesoamerican past. These conditions not only facilitated regional survey but led to the collection of artifacts for continued research in Mexico and the United States. Similarly, Parsons cites how the activities of rural people could be used as an ethnographic resource for contextualizing changing changes in settlement patters derived from their monumental work.

¹ Jeffery Parsons, “An Appraisal of Regional Surveys in the Basin of Mexico 1960-1975,” *Ancient Mesoamerica*. 26 no 2, 184.

² *ibid.*, 185

³ *ibid.*, 185

The bits and pieces spread out against observing archaeologists indicative of ancient Mesoamerica encountered every year between 1967 and 1975 were made visible in part by low yield subsistence agriculture practiced around the countryside of Mexico City by rural people organized into *ejido* agricultural communities. The use of animal-drawn agricultural technology annually drudged up broken fragments of ancient Mesoamerica. The shallow plowing by these implements did little damage to earthen archaeological mounds which were of primary interest. It could be noted then that archaeologists rendered ancient Mesoamerica knowable--as Williams illustrates-- in the light of the *ejido* driven changes in livelihood and social relations in the Mexican countryside.

Rural agricultural communities have a deep history in Mexico. The origins of the modern *ejido* is linked to the 1542 New Laws of the Indies which gave Iberian administrators the authority to compel indigenous people into communities. Once assembled, each indigenous community would be granted land for subsistence and cultivated called an *ejido*.⁴ After the Mexican Revolution, however, the *ejido* became a political tool for the ruling PRI party to redistribute land in the countryside away from large land estates and the Catholic Church to peasant framers and landless laborers. It was this system of agricultural land-tenure that archaeologists traversed in search of Mesoamerican settlements almost 50 years ago.

But in 1992, the Mexican federal government stopped granting *ejidos* and reduced support for smallholders. In the time since then, the countryside of Mexico and the livelihoods of those who dwell therein have gone through profound transformation.⁵ So it is within this atmosphere that I traveled to Mexico's countryside with the support of the Tinker Field Research grant to see what kinds of bits and pieces in the Mexican countryside could be found in the light of these new livelihoods.

Local folklore has it that in 1937 the *ejido* of San Ildefonso Tultepec was started by a blue eyed *gueroito* [light skinned person] who stopped nearby mestizos from snatching up all the land from local Otomi people. The *ejido* is located in the southwestern corner of the state of Queretaro which encompasses the northern edges of the Valle of Mezquital which is an area that historically has been populated to Otomi people.⁶ I spent three weeks in San Ildefonso Tultepec in the home of Anastasia Cruz Vasquez. I helped prepare meals and ate with her family. We talked about her memories of her grand father and about the recent trip to the United States to visit her immigrant children. In my conversations and go-alongs with other local people from the *ejido* the bits and pieces began to take shape before me. My interest quickly shifted towards the remnant vernacular architecture contemporaneous to the founding of San Ildefonso in 1937. In

⁴ Willem Assies, "Land Tenure and Land Tenure Regimes in Mexico: An Overview," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8 no. 1, 35.

⁵ Carola Binder, "Mexico's Second Land Reform," *Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies* Spring 2015.

⁶ Patricia Fournier-Garcia and Lourdes Madragón, "Haciendas, Ranchos and the Otomi Way of Life in the Mezquital Valley, Hidalgo, Mexico," *Ethnohistory*, 50 no 1.

stark contrast, these seemingly “new” settlement patterns were preserved not by low yield subsistence agriculture and minimally invasive technology, but for other reasons. Some cite the utilitarian value of *casas antiguas* [little old houses]. For instance, one person told me that they use it for storage. While others reflected on the sentimental value of keeping intact childhood homes or what Gaston Bachelard describes as a persons’ “first world.”⁷

With the permission of Francisco Dominguez -- an owner of one such vernacular structure. I honed my craft as an archaeologists to recover the bits and pieces of San Ildefonso Tultepec’s recent past. To my surprise, Francisco decided to help me while I conducted fieldwork. My expertise and his *sabiduria* [wisdom] combined in a unique collaboration that resulted in fined grained analysis of the house he grew up in. Although I can’t say for sure, land-tenure changes started almost a generation ago produced to conditions for microhistorical research about the countryside. Francisco helped me excavate the house he grew up in. All the while he would tell me stories about the comings and goings about the house as he saw them. After he helped me map the contours of the former household that supported his upbringing. Now that I think of it, the house was not the only object of study, for the house brought out bits and pieces Francisco’s life and his memories about the ejido community he calls home.

As Williams says, the countryside resists complete observation, but the care and kindness afforded to me by Francisco as we worked to piece the present of San Ildefonso Tultepec makes me think that Sanders and colleagues must have received the same kind of hospitality from ejido members dwelling around Mexico City as they traversed the Mexican countryside in hopes of piecing together the fragments of ancient Mesoamerican all those years ago.

Picture Captions.

Fig 1. The ejido of San Ildefonso is located in El Bothe

Fig 2 Mario and Francisco in front of Francisco’s childhood home.

Fig 3 Mario targeting the laser ranger finder during mapping.

Fig 4 Francisco stands at the edge of a former agricultural field near his childhood home.

Fig 5 the outline of a micromophology sample to be analyzed at UC-Berkeley.

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Maria Jolas trans, Orion Press, 1964.