CÁRDENAS OF MEXICO

By Waldo Frank

IF THE American press is full of doubts about the value and wisdom of Lázaro Cárdenas, we need scarcely blame ourselves; the President of Mexico has a worse press in his own country. In middle-class circles, there, even those that are well-intentioned, one seldom hears him praised except faintly or with solemn reservations. It is true that the peasants (who don't read) love him, and the industrial workers follow him. But your average Mexican intellectual thinks he knows better. Fascist-minded journalists explain at great length that Cárdenas is one of the clever servants of the "international-Communist-Jews." Sincere revolutionary-minded pamphleteers, like the great painter Alfaro Siqueiros, try to show how the "innocent" Cárdenas plays into the hands of the Fascists and runs the risk of becoming a second Madero.[1] It is a common paradox that the articulate classes of any age rarely understand the man — prophet or poet — who profoundly expresses it. Surface and depth seem to be forever in dialectical opposition. And most politicians, like most writers, articulate the surface.

Not often is the deepest nature of a people expressed in a statesman. The love of the Americans today for Lincoln, so much more intimate than what we feel for the more brilliant leaders of our Revolution, suggests that he was of this kind: a politician who articulated qualities of our ethos more usually voiced in a country's arts and folklore. Recently, the Europeans have produced political leaders who expressed, not their creative spirit, but their pathologies — Hitler, for instance, who incarnates the morbidity of a Germany that has been consistently maltreated since the Thirty Years' War, or Mussolini who denotes the Italian vices that Cicero in another crisis flayed in Cataline, and that Cicero's sounder contemporaries knew how to cleanse away. The Bolshevik October threw up great men; but no one who understands the profundities of the race of Tolstoi, Dostoievski, Kropotkin, Moussorgski, could insist that either Lenin or Stalin incarnated more than temporary urgencies of Russia's genius. Today, only two political leaders appear worthy to stand with some approxi-

[1] The gentle inspirer of the Revolution of 1910 who became President and was murdered by the reactionary Victoriano Huerta in 1913.

mate fullness for the source and dynamic aim of their race. One is Gandhi of India; the second is the far less understood Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico. Both these men have applied for the first time to the peculiar problem of their people a method inherent in its peculiar culture. Both are fashioners of independence for nations still far from independence. Both are practical politicians whose work, being profound, is poorly reflected in surface measures and must be appraised in terms of ethic and of culture.

Mexico has had other eminent men of action. There were the leaders of the War of Independence against Spain: Hidalgo, Morelos, Guerrero, etc. There was the full-blooded Zapotec Indian who became President Benito Juárez and who planned the "Reforma" by which the economic hold of the Church was to be broken. There were the varied leaders of 1910 and after: Madero, the liberal, naïve idealist; Zapata, the bloody agrarian; Carranza, Obregón, Vasconcelos. Some of these men were Mexican in ideology (not Juárez); none expressed more than a fragmentary need of the people, and none evolved a method peculiarly and deeply Mexican. I suspect the same could be said of the statesmen before Gandhi in that chaos of races and religions called India. Mexico also has been a chaos. But it promises a cultural synthesis profoundly original and of supreme importance to the political destiny of Latin America and in our American relations.

The point that I must make is that no man — no epoch — of Mexico's past can be said wholly to represent Mexico. In Mexico, there have been great cultural expressions. The Maya of Yucatán and its environs north and south, the Zapotec and Mixtec of Tehuantepec and Oaxaca, the Toltec of the bleak Mexican *Mesa*, produced noble buildings, great sculptures, reached high into the mysteries of mathematics, astronomy, religion. The Aztec failed to synthesize these into a Mexican culture; rather, they weakened, corrupted and decomposed, and were themselves on the decline when Cortés took advantage of the civil strife to overcome them. Mexico proper begins with Cortés — with the symbolic act of his marriage to the Indian Malintzin — but begins with the trauma and convulsion that the Spanish Conquest produced in the Mexican soul. Four centuries have not cured it. Before 1600, buildings and carvings from Chihuahua's desert to Chiapas' jungle, unlike any in Spain or in Spain's other colonies, revealed that the Mexican plastic genius was again at work. Yet this colonial culture rested

on a wounded, somnambulistic folk; it was Mexican in root, in telluric influence, not in flower.

The War of Independence (1810) merely released chaos to the surface. In their revolt against Spain, the *hacendados* (relying of course on their peons to fight their battles) sketched a republic on French-American lines that had no contact with Mexico's economy or culture. A disastrous period it was, because un-Mexican: its symbol was the loss of nearly half the nation's territory to the United States, who with its simpler ethnic problem and its greater political talents (inherited from England) knew what it wanted and how to go about getting it. Spain has never showed capacity for social organization (hence its age-long need of Catholic Rome); its genius has worked in other realms. And of all the Amerindian peoples only the Quechua-Kolya of Peru and Bolivia produced a great political structure. (Their dominion under the Incas was comparable in efficiency with Rome's, and in high ethic with Judea.) The Mexican nations created nothing of this kind. Two distinct humanities, both culturally strong but both weak in the techniques of social justice, married in Mexico and created chaos. Even Juárez knew no better cure for this chaos than the rationalist ideas imported from France. Porfirio Díaz stratified the chaos by clamping down on it a military dictatorship which bought peace by mortgaging the country's wealth at low rates to foreign capital.

The revolution which began in 1910 was really a return to the War of Independence: a return to a fresh and right start. Even now, the process is confused; the right line remains intuitive, lacking the final form that consciousness brings. But there are reasons to believe that the beginning is organic. Mexico's artistic genius is reborn with a vitality and scope that it has never had: witness its painters, musicians, architects and poets. The Public School has become an evangel, passionately brought to the parched folk (whom the Church left in indigence and ignorance) by 70,000 apostolic teachers. And now appears the political leader to express the enormous needs of this chaotic, enormously gifted people through a method that is a Mexican way of life.

In Cárdenas, ethos and political action come together. I do not mean that now, as in the fairy tale, Mexico "will live happily ever after." Dark times are ahead; times of threat to the little tragically gained, a time of pause at best. But there is a beginning in Mexican life of a new, an organically Mexican tradition.

"My work," Cárdenas said to me — and I hope he will forgive this indiscretion, for he is modest, subtle, reticent, like his Tarascan forbears — "my work is primarily to create a new tradition."

II

Let us look at the man. The last time I saw Lázaro Cárdenas in action was recently in Sonora, the arid northwesternmost state which dams, now in construction or projected, will make immensely rich (its soil is said to be better than California's). We drove from Vicam, southeast of Guaymas, through waves of dust hot as red cinders, to Jori, one of eight Yaqui villages.

The Yaquis, a folk poor in the arts and without music, all of whose strength seems to have gone into resistance, have never been truly pacified. The Aztecs failed to make them give tribute. The Spaniards drove them into the metal mountains and stratified their rebellion which has lived four hundred years. Díaz tried to devirilize them by shipping their soldiers — whole regiments — into the south. But each newborn son became a new warrior against the Federals. Now, the method is to win them with kindness. Their immemorial valley villages, taken by Spaniards and retained by *hacendados*, are again theirs — although many families still sulk in the high hills. The local governments are recognized. Schools are established; irrigation and new agricultural methods are introduced for the communal holdings. The Yaquis are growing wheat now, instead of only corn. (I saw the women pound the delicate paste into tortillas and press them white and transparent on their honey-brown arms.) The result is that for ten years the Yaquis, with more bread and fewer dead children, have made no raid against the "Mexicans." But resentment, distrust, wild love of independence, are carved into their stony faces.

It had all been carefully arranged: the eight governors of the eight Yaqui villages were to gather and confer with the President of Mexico in Jori. An event unheard of! Yaqui warfare consists of surprise attacks on unprotected villages and ranches. Men are castrated and shot; pregnant women are disembowelled, houses are razed. Thus, bitterness talks back. President Cárdenas arrived in a cloud of dust without a guard; his normal military aides remained in Vicam. The Yaquis looked out from their 'dobe thatch-roofed huts, silent. On the porch of the "big house" a drum tattooed a laconic welcome. The President was only an hour

and a half late — tantamount to arriving a bit ahead of schedule. The "contact" chief, Pluma Blanca, two guns at his belt, came forward and gruffly saluted the visitor. His gnarled face allowed no softness, but in contrast to the face of the real chief who was not present and whom I met later, it seemed soft. Only a couple of the governors had arrived, he explained, in halting Spanish. Twice, while Cárdenas stood at ease with us in the shade of a wide *aquahuete*, the drum repeated the tattoo: two more governors had arrived. The meaning was clear: one president of 20,000,000 Mexicans equals one governor of less than a thousand Yaquis.

While the sun swung from perpendicular noon into the west, the President waited and discussed phonetics with his friends (only Pluma Blanca, as official host, had joined the group). Finally, he explained that the men on the porch of the "big house" included four of the eight governors, and the others were not coming. The other four refused to travel to Jori. It was too far; it was beneath their dignity.

"Well, we're here," said Cárdenas. "Let's have talk with those who have come." He strode to the house. The Yaquis shook hands silently, the President murmured the equivalent of "Glad to meet you." They all sat down on the porch, the President facing the men.

In a wise but conventional statesman it would have been possible to detect the effort to avoid — perhaps successfully — any sign of irritation or condescension. It would have been possible to feel, subtly, some such process as this: "I am the head of a nation of 20,000,000. I could wipe out or ignore this remnant reduced by stubbornness to a bare 6,000. Instead, I give them water, villages, wheat. I come to see them, and they have the impudence to try to snub me! *Noblesse oblige.* No sign of what I'm thinking!" In Cárdenas, no such effort of disguise existed. The man felt the Yaqui disease because he was within the Yaqui heart. Intuitively. As representative of a government with a long record of oppression, he owed the Yaquis everything; and if they took *anything*, he would thank them.

He spoke. He had come to learn the needs of the Yaqui nation: water, land, tools, education, doctoring; and to discuss with the Yaqui chiefs the problems they chose to present. The interpreter at his side translated this into Yaqui; and the replies into Spanish. The men voted: almost inarticulate assents, and longer, sung "no's." Soon, the snag came: *this* and *that*, they could not decide

without the full eight villages. Cárdenas, casually, almost imperceptibly, made his suggestion. "Why don't we all meet tomorrow at eleven?" He named the major village of the absent four. The proud governors assented. Less by not preaching, not exhorting, not subtly hinting with a veiled threat, than by his utter aloofness from the mood of these, he had won. The Yaqui's rigid pride was annulled by his lack of it.

Now this scene, since it is archetypical, reveals a paradox. Cárdenas runs Mexico; in fact, he has begun to transform it. And Mexico's twenty millions — so diverse its peoples and its climates, so hostile most of its lands, so intricate its economic and psychologic problems after six hundred years of exploitation (the Aztec, the Spaniard, the Church, the Capitalist — and the endemic politician), must be a mighty hard land to run, much less transform. Yet Cárdenas has spent over half his fifty-four months in office outside the capital, attending to details — a twenty-hour day, a seven-day week without fatigue, without impatience — details even more "trivial" than the pride problems of the relic Yaquis. How does he find time for the big jobs? Does he let his secretaries do them? Or perhaps his Ministers? [2]

Let's postpone the answer. I went with him once on a ten-day "campaign" into the Sierra de Oaxaca — the bleak, indigent land where the folk starve while the corn roots touch enormous wealth. We abandoned the motor trucks at the top of the road and took to horse. We tramped to more than one village after an hour's trail too tough for horses. We slept and froze, wrapped in ponchos, in mud huts ten thousand feet in the air. (One night the village was Gelatao, where Benito Juárez, Zapotec shepherd boy, was born. He never returned to honor his home; Cárdenas did it for him.) This is an ingrown land with petty chiefs feuding. Day after day, the President of the Republic listened to the men, the mothers, even the children, the teachers — always the teachers. Detail after detail. And day after day, his visit cut a swath of clarity and good feeling through the emotional débris. Detail after detail: a new school, a new irrigation ditch, a new political alliance. But the life of the whole Sierra changing!

I recall a day at a collective farm in the Laguna. This is a rich valley astride two states, Durango and Coahuila, that grows good cotton and wheat. It used to belong to a handful of *latifundistas;* now forty thousand former peons own and work it. A new dam,

[2] At least one spent his three years in office plotting a rebellion.

El Palmito, will be ready in 1940 to catch the rainy season flood of the river Nazas and turn the region into another Egypt. Cárdenas loves that dam: when he rode out to observe its progress, his sensitive hands stirred as if he longed to caress it. But he had endless hours for the humble collective farms, to hear the women tell their petty troubles; to watch the men — most of them veterans of Pancho Villa — raise useless clouds of dust as they deployed before him on their horses, brandishing old guns.

Details. The patience of a ward politician, the passion of a fishwife, for details. As he discusses a school, a ditch, a tractor, an individual injustice, it is Mexico that changes!

He overworks his secretaries by outworking them — eighteen hours a day. I once heard his former adjutant, Colonel Ignacio Beteta (the brother of the brilliant Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Ramón Beteta), sigh: "If only we had a good-sized rebellion! Putting it down would be comparative peace." He lives in a perpetual campaign; he is a president on a war footing trying to win peace for his people. That deploying of the veterans of the Revolution in the dust of their horses is symbolic. By moving up and down the land, Cárdenas has brought back the Revolution, made it a "perpetual revolution," in terms of better bread and water — and better music.

III

What kind of worker exhausts his attention, seemingly, on detail — and when the work is done, all the materials have been transmuted, the whole speaks? I have named the artist. Mexico from immemorial times has been a land of artists. Now Mexico has produced a statesman whose method is the artist's. More than once, watching Cárdenas at work, I have thought of the sculptor lovingly modelling the clay. The artist has a vision; he knows more or less what he's after, even though his final product is sure to differ from his precise preconception. But in the process of work, his vision seems to die: point by point, he must serve the particular problems humbly, must impregnate unconsciously the individual part with the universal. Cárdenas knows something of what he's about; he can talk to his friends intelligently to prove it. But deeper than his telling is his knowledge of Mexico. Deeper than his knowing is his intuition of Mexico's destiny. And more immediate than either his knowledge or his intuition is his absorption in the particular event before him. No President has ever

known so many regions of Mexico so well. No President has seemingly so engulfed his time and his attention for five years in the details of events. *Yet Mexico changes.*

The most famous act of his administration, of course, has been his ousting of the foreign oil interests from the soil which, by constitutional law, was always and forever Mexican. To Cárdenas and to Mexico this was a detail in the larger battle: a forced action, undesirable at the moment but necessary and now permanently organized (with less than anticipated trouble) within the political whole. The true center of the President's reconstruction is the building of the collective farm, the *ejido.* He has increased to a serious pitch the expropriation of large lands, which dawdled and dwindled during the régimes of his predecessors. (To the owners always remains a *lote* sufficiently large to sustain them at a higher standard of living than the *ejidatarios.*) He has enormously pushed the improvement of these lands by the building of dams, canals, irrigation webs, roads, sugar refineries, etc. The millions of dispossessed men and women, now restored to their own earth in organized, autonomous communities served by federal banks, constitute for Cárdenas the sun of Mexico's system. About the *ejido,* like planets, all other classes of productive and functional labor are supposed to revolve. Their gravitational orbits are set by the sun — the *ejido.* The constellated life of the Republic, by economic law and by national psychology, must obey the "natural law" of the *ejido.*[3]

This is why Cárdenas was not afraid of the oil boycott; why he will face, if he must, the loss of the silver market; why he is not afraid of private industries and, far from intending to expropriate the mines, is ready to welcome into Mexico new large industrial colonies of Spaniards or Jews, backed by foreign money. The

[3] The great majority of Mexicans live on the land. But they have been a horribly submerged majority, their productive power low because of low agricultural standards and poor water, their consuming powers almost negligible. Therefore, they have subsisted in an isolated, archaic economy while the minority of industrial labor and middle class have established whatever international and modern economy Mexico possessed — supplying all the taxes and determining the national budget. The plan to lift up this agrarian majority into large producers and into great industrial consumers is, therefore, sound. Mexico, more than any other country of Latin America except Brazil — more than Argentina — can establish its economy (like that of the United States, Russia and France) on a system of major self-adequacy (this is not autarchy, of course). Mexico will even be able to construct steel, though its coal deposits are poor, when the oil-iron process has been perfected. To get a real start on this plan, Mexico needs investment capital. If the United States will help to stabilize the present liberal revolution, by refusing to let the oil interests indirectly shape its policy and public opinion; if it will abandon the old standards of "grab" which the oil interests exemplified, in favor of a new method of legitimate coöperation and small profit, a new era between the countries can begin. Its effects on the rest of Latin America will be enormous.

ejido, he is confident, exists. It has already, he believes, established a gravitational field strong enough to absorb legitimate enterprise and to resist the sullen, plotting foe. His soothing addresses to the Chambers of Commerce are sincere. But on the other hand, where the logic of events has already nationalized industries, like oil and the railroads, he will not go back, and he welcomes the Labor propaganda which has taught that there shall be no retreat. Cárdenas favors autonomy wherever possible; and frequently where it proves unwise. Thus, the administration of the *Petromex* is working well; the railways are working at least not worse than they did under Díaz. But the autonomous University of Mexico has fallen into the hands of middle-class boys with sterile and dangerous Fascist tendencies. The Army, which he has begun to rebuild from the bottom as a popular movement; the public schools; the ministry of communications; the unions of lawyers, doctors, engineers; small business; even the *Casa de España* whose duty it is to place Spain's exiled intellectuals in the schools of the Republic — these, to his mind, are typical entities fit to run themselves, for better or for worse, within the gravitational "sun" of the *ejido*. Cárdenas knows that forces within and without the nation are plotting counterrevolution. He knows that many of the old generals hate him and his work. He has faith in the intuition of his people; but he has confidence in the *ejido*. Perhaps, if Spain's Republic had really partitioned the lands. . . . Time will tell.

But it should at least be clear how far this man and this nation stand from the prevalent collectivisms of Europe. Communism is as remote from this loose liberal system in which state-owned and private industries, and many parties, are made to move together within a constellation, as is Fascism. Every value, every act of Cárdenas' Mexico, cries against the Fascists to whom reluctantly oil is sold, because there are few other markets.[4] Mexico in political faith is a militant democracy. Its constitutional law prevents the reëlection of the President, and that statute has an almost religious sanction. In economics, Mexico does not tend toward the state capitalism of the totalitarian nations, but toward a loose-formed agrarian syndicalism spiritualized by values of the Mexican ethos with its Indian and Christian depths: depths which no anarchosyndicalist or socialist school possesses.

This is the essence of the matter: the ethical motivation of

[4] A beginning has been made of a market in South America, notably Brazil.

Lázaro Cárdenas which begins to articulate — gropingly, hazardously — the spirit of his people. Cárdenas left the cornfield of his mother at sixteen, to join the Revolution. He became a cavalry general. His whole life has been spent with military men, and he has surrounded himself with the best of the Army. Nevertheless, violence is alien to him. Since he became President, he is said to have shown anger once: when he learned that Cedillo had been shot. That rebellious General had been in his cabinet for three years. Since we all knew he was plotting, and since Cárdenas is no fool, presumably Cárdenas knew it too. He did not remove him from office. He let Cedillo's plot ripen until Cedillo removed himself. But he did not want him to die — not even, as he did die, in open battle against the Republic. The "new tradition" is against bloodshed, even when it is justified.

The same distrust of violence, even of the violence of isolated "reason," guides Cárdenas in all his ways. The press of Mexico is violently against him. Every week articles appear in the capital that would not shame *Der Stuermer* for violence. Cárdenas suppresses no sheet, big or small. He answers the dangerous attacks with works. He has lifted the violent embargo on the churches. He prefers that the law be broken, and that an illegal number of priests officiate in the cathedrals. Even his attitude toward his own mistakes is that of least resistance. Many of his appointments have not been good; but he prefers to let the wrong men gradually remove themselves from office. He prizes the mood of stability, it seems, more than immediate efficiency. Whether this is a profound gauge of what Mexico needs, or a fatal error, the years will tell. An organic sense of Mexico's growth, not in simple "progress" but in the intricate dialectic of life, appears to control him — often against the obvious precept of reason.

Thus, his extraordinary attitude toward the Presidential succession. Although the present term does not close until December 1940, the fight is on. Cárdenas weighs the danger of not actively supporting some candidate of his own — a man like General Francisco Múgica, who as Minister of Communications has helped him faithfully. If he does not, a man like General Almazán might be brought into power by the disgruntled middle class, the Callistas, and the conservative and Fascist generals. Cárdenas weighs this danger against the resolve in no way to influence the succession to the Presidency; and chooses the latter course.

He said to me: "I trust the people's intuition." He said further:

"Because our people have always known that their chiefs were imposed on them from above, resentment, cynicism about government, corruption and violence, have lived on in every village." Mexico is to have at last a First Magistrate who does not impose his successor. This outweighs the political advantages for Mexico if Cárdenas kept control at this dangerous moment. He is creating a tradition; within it politics is to be transformed.

These qualities of the man have their defects and their dangers. I have said that the method of Cárdenas is very like the artist's. He governs, as the sculptor models, by intimate touch. But good administration is largely *delegation*. Often it seems that Cárdenas finds too few good men to fulfill his work, to found his "new tradition." Many a friend of Mexico doubts whether the administrative organization that Cárdenas has built will be strong enough to resist the reaction — or the pause — that world events imply for Mexico. There are many good young men in the government: men like Ramón Beteta, Gabino Vázquez, Chavez Orozco, etc. But among their older chiefs, who normally will carry on, many are inferior, even alien to the Revolution. The chief defect of Cárdenas' régime is, perhaps, that he has not inspired enough passionate leaders among the intellectuals who must bring consciousness to the mass devotion he has aroused. Intuition without such conscious leadership can go astray.

Another danger. The artist works with a medium and within an environment that he can, more or less, delimit. Cárdenas works with a country full of subversive forces, and within a hostile world to which his country is dangerously exposed. Reaction at home is geared to reaction abroad. Can the man's shrewd sense of what is Mexico compensate for his helplessness before world forces, and guide the frail young life? An immediate pause, even a temporary reversal, will not necessarily prove the case against him. Perhaps his method, which has appealed to the latent dignity of his people, and strengthened it, will in the end prove the wisest politics because it does in fact create a new tradition. Perhaps his refusal to force his beneficent program against natural inertia will prove the shrewdest insurance against the violent counterblow which the "straight-line" revolutionary tactics of Múgica might provoke.

It is a dangerous course Cárdenas has taken. But it is a dangerous world he lives in. And although his values are of peace, Cárdenas is not a stranger to the strategies of battle.