

Localized Voices Within the Mexican Oil Industry (~1900-1938)

The period of the early 1900s through 1938 comprised an intense period in Mexican history. Mexico underwent a series of bloody revolutions, riots and coups as the country attempted to find a political system that worked best for itself, resulting in an extensive transformation of the nation. Furthermore, this timeframe constituted an era in which oil played a large role in shaping Mexico - US relations. In the first decades of the 1900s, the US bought acres of oil-filled land in Mexico, eyes set on the profit that would come from the extraction and processing of oil. Up until 1938, when Mexico nationalized its oil industry, the United States benefited greatly from Mexican oil. This generated a lot of discourse from multiple perspectives, all of which focused on the dynamic that existed between the two countries, with some people seeing US imperialism in the oil industry as either conducive or detrimental to Mexico. These conversations illustrate the amount of reflection generated about Mexico - US dealings in oil, and demonstrate the nuanced viewpoints of actors such as the Mexican elite, US journalists and scholars, and the less documented voices of Indigenous people and Mexican women. These perspectives indicate views on US imperialism within the Mexican oil industry were not universal. Those with the opinion that US imperialism benefited the United States saw it as a positive, and oftentimes downplayed the voices of the unheard, while those who saw the United States' imperialism as detrimental focused on its negative impacts. The accumulation of oil by a country represented prosperity, and the multiplicity of voices that existed within the Mexican oil industry serve to bring to light the processes different people engaged in to exploit or preserve oil wealth.

Carranza's disapproval of the United States' dismissal of Mexican citizen rights and Mexican interests reveals the national perspective on US imperialism in the Mexican oil industry

at the time, seeing it as an infringement of Mexican sovereignty. This can be specifically gleaned from President Carranza's message to the National Congress in 1919. At the beginning of Carranza's message, he addressed Mexican relations with the United States, noting that "the United States Government believes that Mexico is moved by the best intentions to settle the oil controversy" (Carranza 6). However, Carranza made it clear that the United States did not have innocent intentions, exposing a double standard that the US set for Mexico that was consistently addressed throughout his message. He quoted from one of Woodrow Wilson's speeches in regards to the oil industry in Mexico, wherein President Wilson implied that if Mexico would not provide equal treatment towards US citizens in regards to oil regulations, the United States would reserve for itself the right to consider the interest of its citizens (Carranza 7). It is clear from this message that Wilson would consider sacrificing Mexican oil interests in favor of its own oil interests, by threatening what President Carranza claimed as "diplomatic intervention" (Carranza 7). Carranza used the section of Wilson's speech to illustrate that not only did the United States prioritize its citizens' needs, ultimately neglecting Mexican citizens upon whose land the oil was being derived from, but that the US would apply pressure on Mexico in order to achieve its goals if Mexico did not willingly comply. However, a United States journalist told a different story in regards to the oil industry in Mexico.

Countering the Mexican perspective of US hegemony in the Mexican oil industry, Edward Bell, a United States journalist, focused on the dangers the US faced from President Carranza's rule, as well as the centrality of oil to the United States. The *New York Times* article written by Bell titled, "Mexico and Our Three-Fourths of all Mexican Oil" advances the idea that Mexico holds the only sufficient amount of oil outside of other Latin American countries for the US to meet its oil demands (Bell 48). This mentality neglects any consideration of Mexican

interests, and paints the United States' needs as the primary concern. Mexico is seen as a land that can be exploited for the United States' gain and development. Furthermore, the article highlights the threat President Carranza posed for United States oil companies with his idea of nationalizing oil. Bell wrote that Carranza "hated [the United States] when [they] had done so much for him" (Bell 48) in reference to the expansion of the oil industry in Mexico. Based on this article, it is made clear that the United States benefited from its exploitation of Mexican oil, as the US required it to be able to develop itself. Thus, the author, through his own bias, is dismissive of Mexican voices and what they thought of US involvement in the Mexican oil industry. Based upon how Bell described Carranza, it can be determined that perspectives that challenged the United States' opinions were seen as threatening in nature, because they posed a threat to US oil interests in Mexico. Bell's discussion of the US involvement in Mexican oil is framed in such a manner so as to distance the audience from the notion of the detrimental aspects of US imperialism — rather, the discussion painted it as beneficial for the US economy— and to attach urgency towards the dangerous attitudes exhibited by Mexican politicians, such as Carranza, who challenged the United States' status quo in the Mexican oil industry. The United States' actions were thus justified in this manner. While Bell approached discussion of US imperialism in the Mexican oil industry in a less upfront manner, other US journalists were more upfront in their discussion of this subject.

Another US journalist, Stephen Bonsal, portrayed how US imperialism in Mexico benefits the United States in a more direct manner, and specifically noted US citizens' migrations into Mexico for the purpose of accumulating wealth through Mexican oil. He described Mexico as a country whose wealth was recognized by US citizens, as demonstrated by their "southward migration" (Bonsal 385). Bonsal went as far as to write that "large districts of the country in

Tamaulipas, Tehuantepec ... have been divested of all Mexican characteristics. They are largely owned and occupied by our people and appear to be detached portions of [the United States]" (Bonsal 385). Bonsal hinted at US imperialism through migrations of US citizens to Mexican soil by illuminating the US perspective of Mexico as a nation whose wealth could be exploited by the US. The alteration of the demographics of the region and subsequent deprivation of its Mexican characteristics is an inherent aspect of US imperialism, and Bonsal saw it as a "natural movement which cannot be controlled" (Bonsal 385) yet it clearly benefited US interests to have some of their citizens established in Mexico so as to accrue oil wealth which could be used to boost the US economy. There is no consideration of the Mexican commoners' perspectives in regards to US migration into their nation; Bonsal only stated that the intelligent classes of Mexican society welcomed this migration (Bonsal 385) which demonstrates the general disregard for the overall sentiment that existed in Mexican society towards US encroachment. However, not all US citizens held the belief that US imperialism in Mexico was beneficial.

David Thomas, a professor of history at the University of Arkansas, embraced a more uncommonly held belief, one that highlighted the inequality in regards to the United States' relationship with Mexico and its oil industry. He noted that President Wilson "declared that it was the right of any people to do anything they please with their own country and their own government" (Thomas 203) seemingly cognizant of Mexico's independence. However, the same administration exposed its hypocrisy by drafting a treaty in response to Article 27 of the new Mexican constitution (which sought to nationalize Mexican resources) and stated that if Mexico did not accept the treaty, the United States would consider a military occupation in order to protect its oil interests (Thomas 209). Thomas brought to light these two conflicting perspectives in order to demonstrate the contradictions that existed between the United States' claims and

their vested interests. The United States proved unwilling to collaborate with Mexico and even threatened intervention unless Mexico provided US citizens with exclusive rights and did not interfere with US oil dominion in Mexican territory, yet claimed that Mexico had a freedom to determine the progression of its future. However, US citizens' perspectives are not the only ones that are important when it comes to considering the impacts of US imperialism within the Mexican oil industry.

The Indigenous of Mexico represented the more unheard voices when it came to perspectives of US oil imperialism; for the Indigenous, US imperialism was injurious, and they thus depicted it this way when they expressed their viewpoints. The Teenek, who were the Indigenous people of the Huasteca region in northern Veracruz, had been tricked out of their land by United States oil land agents, who used vague language such as "subsoil rights" and "leasing" (Santiago, "Culture Clash" 65) to give the impression that these Indigenous peoples still had control over their land. However, the Mexican newspaper, *The Mexican Herald* obscured this reality, and rather chose to focus on the "negotiations [that were] in progress for the merging of the oil lands" ("Proposed Oil" 10). There was no mention of how the land from which the oil was extracted had been acquired. The focus on progress meant the exclusion of underrepresented groups, such as the Indigenous Teenek, as they represented an obstacle, especially when it came to the initial acquisition of land. It was not until the halt of the Mexican oil boom in 1921 that the Teenek were able to express their distress to a wide audience, as the Mexican government was forced "to focus on the local history of oil exploitation in a very public way" (Santiago, "Culture Clash" 68-69) through newspapers and via the investigation conducted by Secretary of the Interior Plutarco Calles. His denouncement of the oil companies for their abuse of Indigenous people and the land, along with the newspapers providing a platform for the Teenek to recount

their exploitation, gave rise to a more critical viewpoint of United States oil companies in Mexico. Nevertheless, while the Teenek received temporary recognition, their voices were seldom recorded, and thus must be derived from a conjunction of the limited primary sources which highlight their experiences, with more mainstream sources that hide, yet also corroborate these direct primary sources. The Indigenous were not the only group of people in Mexico who saw US imperialism as detrimental while simultaneously having their voices obscured.

Women also made up another sector of unheard Mexican voices, but rather than explicitly voice their views on US imperialism, they demonstrated it through their engagement within and outside their traditional roles. As a result of the implementation of US oil companies, families were suddenly faced with the prospect of needing enough monthly income to survive. The men of the households did not earn enough to make a substantial living, so Mexican women began employing themselves (Santiago, "Women of the Mexican Oil Fields" 96). Despite this active role that Mexican women took on to complement the work that their husbands did in the oil fields, the US Department of Commerce — in conjunction with one of the oil companies — decided to portray them in a very passive manner. "Through the Oil Fields of Mexico" was a motion picture filmed to depict the process of oil refinement. While its intention was to "illustrate Mexican life" it appears to have done so through the lens of a US perspective of Mexican life, as the only time it mentions Mexican women was to show them "carrying water jars upon their heads," ("Through the Oil Fields" 292) a very stereotypical and unrefined vision of Mexican women's role in the oil industry. Regardless of how they were passively portrayed by oil companies, this change in traditional roles resulted in Mexican women distancing themselves from typical domestic behaviors. Mexican women engaged in strikes on behalf of their husbands, so that they may earn enough money for their families (Santiago, "Women of the Mexican Oil

Fields” 100). This action illuminated Mexican women’s discontent with how US oil companies treated their husbands. However, it also simultaneously showed a shift in the traditional behavior of Mexican women, although they were protesting their husband’s unfair wages so that they could maintain their traditional gendered roles within the household. While Mexican women demonstrated their perspective of US oil imperialism in a unique manner, their voices were seldom recorded as their work was not seen as explicitly related to the Mexican oil industry.

“Mexico has been compared to an ignorant beggar sitting on a bag of gold. The figure should now be extended so as to include the men fetching the gold from the bag” (Thomas 224), an analogy written by David Thomas at the end of his paper to illustrate US imperialism in the Mexican oil industry. This perfectly sums up the diverse discourses that existed in regards to the relationship between the US and Mexico, and whether US imperialism was perceived as beneficial or not. Those who viewed US imperialism as advantageous would see this quote as depicting the successes of US exploits, while those who saw US imperialism as damaging would view this quote as demonstrating how the US took advantage of Mexico's wealth and altered Mexican land and its economy. This exhibited that there was no singular narrative of the history of US presence in Mexican oil. Ultimately, these perspectives shaped US-Mexico relations, and through a series of events, led up to the Mexican nationalization of oil, which expropriated US and other foreign oil companies.

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