

In August of 1826, Juan de los Santos, the mayor of the indigenous villages San Pedro and San Pablo Cuaco in Puebla, Mexico wrote an outraged letter to the authorities of the nearby city of Atlixco. He indignantly protested the way the manager at the nearby Hacienda Acocotla was treating the people of his village. The manager, it seems, had come into the village and rounded up the wives and mothers of men who had contracted to work the harvest at Acocotla. Acocotla's manager had taken the women back to the Hacienda where, we are told, he imprisoned them in a jail. When asked by the authorities, the manager admitted that he had indeed done what the Mayor accused him of, but, he continued, it was the only way he could ensure that the men showed up to work. The authorities ultimately supported the manager's actions, and the women of San Pedro and San Pablo Cuaco remained imprisoned for the duration of that season's harvest. **(SLIDE TWO—MAP)**

This dispute between the mayor and hacienda manager was a symptom of a problem that had plagued the Valley of Atlixco since the first attempts at the establishment of Mexican Independence in September of 1810. The problem, quite simply, was how to structure labor relations in the nascent state. During the colonial period, indigenous communities had been granted extensive protections, but the end of rule by Spain brought with it the end of restrictions placed by the Crown on the exploitation of indigenous labor. While seeking to create a new, modern, and profitable nation, Mexicans needed to address the chronic labor shortages that had plagued the colony, a challenge compounded by the Valley's general civil unrest. Without control of labor, Mexicans would not be able to define a modern and stable state.

In 1826, Acocotla's manager used incarceration to deal with the problem of labor organization. It was a strategy that Acocotla's owners and managers would use for at least the next fifteen years. We read again about it in 1839, when Acocotla's owner writes to the local authorities to confirm permission for the presence of a prison on his property. He explains that he is not using it in any way that would conflict with the government's rights and duties, but simply to ensure the

presence of his workers during the harvest. He justifies his tactics by arguing, “everyone is doing it.” Indeed, it seems that everybody was. The authorities wrote back, granting easy permission for the prison providing that the hacendado followed “the latest in science and sanitation.”

Unsurprisingly, incarceration doesn’t seem to have offered a solution, and landowners continued to struggle with the problem of rural labor organization but their struggles seem not to have been in vain. **(SLIDE THREE—CENSUS TEXT)** Thirty years ago, historian Fredrich Katz showed that indigenous workers housed at haciendas were among the least rebellious of Mexico’s peasants when the Mexican Revolution erupted. What, exactly, made them so conservative? Speculations regarding living conditions, income stability, and the possible perks represented by worker debts abound, but because so little remains in the documentary record about the day-to-day experiences of hacienda workers during the century preceding the Revolution, most historians admit that the missing information makes certainty impossible. At the Hacienda Acocotla, for example, this census from the local archives provides the most written information available to us.

(SLIDE FOUR—HAROLD AT CHAPEL) To develop a more complete picture, Dr. Harold Juli and I set out on a program of archaeological, ethnoarchaeological, and historical research in 2004. The data garnered during the subsequent seven years of research include more than eighty-seven thousand artifacts, more than a thousand pages of transcribed interviews, and hundreds of pages of transcriptions of historical records from local, state, national, and private archives. Together, these data allow us to understand a bit about the day-to-day experiences of workers at the Hacienda San Miguel Acocotla.

When I arrived at Acocotla in the summer of 2004, I had no idea that a prison had stood on its grounds. Were it not for the few letters later found in the local archives, no evidence for this extreme coercion would exist now, and why would we look for such a thing if Acocotla’s peones were as conservative as Katz had led us to expect? Indeed, when I first arrived at the Hacienda on

that cool June morning seven years ago, I found myself looking not at worker's prisons, but at worker's homes, a space called the calpanería. **(SLIDE FIVE—CALPANNERÍA WITH VOLCANO)**. Today, the calpanería's thirty-seven small adobe rooms flank the grand archway that is the entrance to Acocotla's casco.

During the summer of 2005 and the winter of 2007, I excavated a number of the rooms as well as the field in front and found that the calpanería we see here had been built during the third quarter of the nineteenth century though historical records tell us that entire families were living year round at the Hacienda by 1842. We know, also thanks to archival sources, that the number of people inhabiting the worker's housing fluctuated, ranging as low as 34 people to as many as 121. We know that turnover was high. Few individuals listed on one census are named on another, though a handful appear on every record.

(SLIDE SIX—RECONSTRUCTIONS OF ROOMS) If oral history is to be believed, the calpanería's little rooms were nicer than anything anyone in the neighboring villages had. Archaeological research shows us that each room measured three meters by three meters. Each room had one doorway and no windows. The walls were made of adobe and plastered white. Some rooms had plastered floors, and all had roofs made of red pan tiles. In each room, as if deliberately placed by the architect, a fire burned on the floor in the northwest corner. The fire would have warmed the space, and perhaps people would have cooked a bit of food over it, though our research located a communal kitchen nearby. Though nicer than the other housing options available, the calpanería, with its exact, severe, cookie-cutter design, replaced the prison cell. The hacendado had created rigidly identical housing that ensured his employees were present and ready to work every morning.

Acocotla's prisons were not only architectural. As at other haciendas throughout the region, debt peonage was used to bind workers to the land though the dynamic and experience of debt

bondage is today much debated. Some historians argue it was a form of slavery, while others argue it was a perk or incentive—enabling workers to purchase luxury goods they otherwise wouldn't have had access to. In part, the problem is that the experience of debt peonage seems to have varied drastically by region. Though some historians have found that debts were relatively infrequent, with as few as one third of the workers owing any money to the hacienda owner at all, at Acocotla on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, ninety percent of the peons were in debt to the hacienda owner.

Historians have also argued that worker's respective debts were quite low, and indeed, at Acocotla, debts ranged anywhere from a few pesos to as much as one hundred and ten. Though a balance of only a few pesos, or a couple of weeks work, may seem inconsequential, Acocotla's managers seem to have pursued the payment of all debts enthusiastically—even beyond the grave. In 1864, a young widow by the name of Maria Catarina, who lived in the village of San Jerónimo Coyula, registered a complaint with the authorities in Atlixco against Luis Tlalpanco, Acocotla's manager. Tlalpanco, she said, was insisting she pay her recently deceased husband's debt of four pesos. Worst of all, because she couldn't pay it, Tlalpanco had taken her six year old son to work the debt off for her. Maria Catarina claimed, plaintively, that in taking her six year old son, Tlalpanco had left the family without anyone to support her and her three daughters. Though to us, four pesos is an inconsequential sum, it was, in 1864, the price of Maria Catarina's six year old son.

When one considers the Hacienda Acocotla's 19th century history of labor relations, the virtual indenture of Maria Catarina's young son seems to be a mild incidence of coercion. After all, Tlalpanco was not locking the entire female population of neighboring villages in prisons. Maria Catarina's case was the worst of a more subtle pattern of cooption seen at Acocotla during the second half of the nineteenth century. Her complaint against the Hacienda manager emphasizes the precarious position occupied by her family and others like them. As occasional, casual laborers at the Hacienda Acocotla, Maria Catarina's family had the least access to economic resources afforded by

hacienda employment. Her neighbors who choose to abandon their village and its traditional protections fared much better, at least in economic terms.

(SLIDE SEVEN) Families who moved into the Hacienda Acocotla's calpanería had a number of advantages. According to oral histories collected in the descendant community, they were guaranteed full employment for all members of their family old enough to work. The Hacienda's resident workers may have enjoyed a higher social status than their village-dwelling neighbors thanks to the neat adobe and plaster rooms they were assigned, associated with the rest of the Hacienda's casco.

Archaeological evidence suggests the material benefits may have extended beyond simple architectural structures. Inhabitants of the calpanería also had access to elite goods seemingly unavailable to either their ancestors or their neighbors in nearby villages. For example, though utilitarian ceramic vessels for the preparation and storage of food were made out of locally produced redwares, tablewares found in the calpanería and its associated midden were made out of the traditionally more "elite" majolicas. Prior to the 19th century, majolica production had been severely regulated and constrained. Prices for majolicas were high, and access to these wares was restricted to the elite classes. Similar contexts from the colonial period show many fewer fragments of this elite ware than the seven percent of the more than 82,000 artifacts recovered during excavations at Acocotla.

(SLIDE EIGHT) With the establishment of independence in the early years of the 19th century, regulation for the production of these wares disappeared. The majolicas found at the Hacienda Acocotla were not the well-made elite wares of an earlier century but were in fact poorly executed "seconds." Some of the vessels were produced by inexperienced potters who seem to have been uncertain about how to throw a pot and were unsteady with a paintbrush. Other fragments showed mistakes in production, the most commonly identified of which were pots that had stuck

together during firing. It seems likely that these pots were made by untrained potters and sold at prices lower than those of the more “professional” majolicas. But even as seconds, their presence at Acocotla is important.

(SLIDE NINE) Using minimum vessel countsⁱ, I compared the relative abundance of ceramics in private and public areas of the Hacienda. With the exception of Room 11 (which had a significantly smaller number of artifacts than the rest of the rooms), the relative abundance of majolicas and common redwares was matched in all areas.ⁱⁱ This even distribution of goods suggests that the majolicas were provided by the hacienda owner or manager. Though the versions of this tableware found in the calpanería would have been the cheaper version of those that appeared on the hacienda owner’s supper table, inhabitants of the calpanería were still given access to “elite” goods that inhabitants in surrounding villages would have had less, or possibly no, access to. By extending access to such goods to the inhabitants of the calpanería, the owners and managers of the Hacienda San Miguel Acocotla solidified class divisions and their associated material trappings.

(SLIDE TEN) In 1821, Mexico became an independent nation but the chaos of the war was not over. Over the course of the next 90 years, Mexico would have more than 40 changes in government, a period terminated with the eruption of the Mexican Revolution. This tumultuous period was transformative for the people of the Mexican countryside, arguably as transformative as the Spanish conquest had been three hundred years earlier. With the precarious establishment of the new Mexican state came the need to establish a new Mexican society.

For owners of rural haciendas, the freedom from Spanish rule presented new opportunities for the organization of their businesses. It was no longer necessary to respect the independence and protections given indigenous communities by the Spanish Crown during the Colonial period. Rural landowners had been plagued by labor troubles for three hundred years, but, under the new regime, they had the opportunity to redefine labor relations and solve their longstanding problems. Initially,

landowners in the Valley of Atlixco opted for extreme and overtly coercive methods, such as the construction of hacienda prisons, but these coercive methods failed miserably. During the colonial period, indigenous communities had become adept at using the Spanish legal system to defend their rights against the Spanish. During the early years of Mexican Independence, indigenous communities in the Valley of Atlixco continued this tradition.

A new experiment was begun during the second half of the 19th century. Instead of coercing workers, indigenous laborers were co-opted into the developing capitalist system. Initially, this experiment seems to have been successful. Workers and their families were provided with a place to live that was nicer than anything they would have found in their own villages. The small rooms made out of adobe had pan tile roofs and plaster walls. Their association with the grand architecture of the Hacienda's main buildings may have imparted a certain amount of status to their inhabitants. The expansion of the system of debt peonage gave workers greater financial security, in the short term, than they had had earlier. Individuals lucky enough to secure a place in the calpanería would have had access to the material trappings of the upper classes in the form of things like majolica tablewares. Ultimately, though, these things that seemed initially to be such a boon proved to be just another sort of prison.

ⁱ Minimum vessel counts were calculated using rim shreds. Ceramic type, vessel form, rim diameter and surface treatment were taken into account.

ⁱⁱ Total number of vessels identified in each area were: Room 11—23, Room 18—44, Room 20—81, Room 21—87, Room 22—62, Midden—612.