

CONCENTRATION OF URBAN  
PROPERTY OWNERSHIP  
Sources and Analytical Perspectives, 1813–1900

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This research proposed to define how property was distributed in the national capital throughout the 1800s, to evaluate the importance of the concentration of property in the hands of a landed elite, and to describe the social groups which benefited from landownership. Also proposed was an analysis of the impact and changes produced by the decline of one landowning group and its replacement by another in the physical, economic, and social structure of the city.

The investigation was based on the study of documents and other primary sources which permitted the definition of the social groups which owned property, and measurement of the degree to which they monopolized it. Of particular interest was the determination of whether the nationalization of church lands in the mid-1800s was followed by an equitable redistribution of property and the creation of a middle class, or whether it simply resulted in the formation of a new landowning class. The following sources were consulted:

1. *Padrón General* of 1813. A most complete source, it includes the exact location of each building in the city, the proprietor's name, and the rent value.

2. *Avalúo de los terrenos de la ciudad publicado en la Memoria del Ayuntamiento de 1830 y de las casas de la misma practicado en 1836 al decretarse la contribución predial*. Includes only 40 percent of the houses in Mexico City.

3. *Noticia de las fincas pertenecientes a corporaciones civiles y eclesiásticas del Distrito de México*. Also incomplete; it does not contain information relating to private homes.

4. *Padrón de Canales* from the Museum of Mexico City (dated 1860). Offers information only on those homes which received water services from the city.

5. *Padrón General de Aguas* of 1900, from the Municipal Archives of

Mexico City. Relatively complete; contains information on the majority of houses in the capital.

The greatest methodological problem encountered was the comparison of the nineteenth-century documents consulted: Each contained different types of information making it difficult to correlate the statistics from one source with those of another.

A detailed study of these sources revealed that from 1813 to 1856, the greatest concentration of property (approximately 47.1 percent of the total in Mexico City) belonged to the church. Property belonging to individuals accounted for 45.4 percent of the total holdings, and the remaining 5 percent belonged to the city government. No significant changes in the distribution of property were registered before 1856; the church had lost only 10 percent of its previous holdings by that date.

The results of the *Padrón General de Aguas* of 1900 indicate a greater concentration of property was in the hands of individuals (for instance, there was a group of wealthy families each of which possessed between 40 and 100 houses). This unquestionably favors the argument that the nationalization of church property did not produce a more equitable redistribution of lands in Mexico City. Therefore, a study was made of the economic difficulties which prompted the government to sell lands it had expropriated from the church in the 1850s, and how this benefited the newly established landed elite. It was discovered that when the acquisition of property by individuals increased, the amount of property owned by the government decreased. During those years in which the most prominent landowning families in Mexico City purchased the greatest number of homes, such as 1873 and 1874, the government did not acquire more property, but rather offered mortgages and sold much of its property at public auctions. There is evidence that many of the transactions effected in 1873 involved properties which had once belonged to the church, were later nationalized by the government, and then passed into the hands of the newly-landed elite. Financial necessities simply did not permit the gradual sale of the public domain at reasonable prices, but rather pressured the government to sell all property as quickly as possible, at reduced prices, and to whomever could pay the price. Therefore, the sale of nationalized church property only contributed to the formation of a new landed elite.

The breakdown of the concentration of church property produced physical changes in the city, as it enabled the government to construct new avenues and streets through sections of the city which were previously closed to the public. It caused significant social changes by creating a new class of landowners who demanded high rents and prompt payment;

the church was unable to protect its former tenants from the economic demands of the new landlords. Finally, the release of church lands stimulated economic changes. The real estate market, which had been stationary before the nationalization of the ecclesiastical estates, was suddenly set in motion, thereby fomenting the accumulation of capital which was later invested in projects for the urban development of the city. These physical, social, and economic changes will be investigated further in future research.