

A Comment on Race, Class and Status Differences In Merida, Yucatan, Mexico

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RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur discute certaines observations faites par Robert Redfield sur la race, la classe et le statut social à Merida. Contrairement à ce que Redfield a trouvé, l'auteur affirme que, de nos jours, les différences ethniques influencent beaucoup le statut et la classe sociale.

In his classic publication *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941) and in an earlier publication (1938), Robert Redfield determined the extent to which race, class and status differences were recognized in Merida as of 1934. This paper is a critique of Redfield's data and, furthermore, it offers what are believed to be more realistic conclusions based not only on internal evidence, but, also, on the author's own experience while a resident of Merida.¹

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Redfield states that race plays a minor role in defining the classes in Merida (1941:75). He found that "in Yucatan generally, ethnic differences are subordinated to class differences" (p. 79).² By ethnic differences Redfield meant the recognized differences between Maya or Spanish real or supposed biological race, culture, or both (p. 80). The importance of a Maya or Spanish surname also plays a minor role in determining social categories (p. 77). Another division is based on whether an individual wears the traditional folk costume or European dress, which division, with some reservation, is "The only obvious social difference that remains in Merida today . . ." (p. 75).

¹ The undocumented data found in this paper are based upon 45 months residence in Merida between December 15, 1958 and December 20, 1962. The author would like to thank J. Anderson, B. Maclachlan, C. Riley, O. I. Romano V. and Lois Van Rooy who read an earlier and larger version of the manuscript. Any errors or omissions, however, are the writer's.

² References to page numbers are to Redfield 1941.

The next feature considered by Redfield was the extent to which there were classes where the difference between two groups within the society were due to status rather than to ethnic differences (p. 80).

Fixed status differences as to mutually recognized superiority and inferiority between social groups was also investigated by Redfield (p. 80). He stated that "Status [in Merida] has become less a matter of belonging to a recognized social category and more a matter of the circumstances that happen to attend the individual. It is less definitely assigned at birth and is more dependent upon competition" (p. 74); "a status classification based on ethnic consideration is not to be seen" (p. 83). But he adds that status differences may exist between groups which are regarded as being ethnically distinct or that are not defined in ethnic terms (p. 81). Hansen³ (Redfield 1941:24) acknowledged that the wide range of social status in Merida was based on differences of occupation, origin, race, language, and literacy in combination with other factors.

Redfield based his observations on approximately two and one half months of residence in Merida in 1931 and on A. T. Hansen's incomplete monograph on Merida, the latter's copious notes, and many days of discussion with him (p. xii). A. T. Hansen's three-level division of Merida society (Redfield 1941:24, 25) was based on approximately thirty-six months of residence in Merida between 1931 and 1934 (p. xi). Redfield's interpretation of the elements identified with Merida's upper, middle, and lower class is, as he himself admits, a summary of Hansen's unpublished work. However, a list comparing the two will be given to note which factors Redfield thought to be the most diagnostic when defining a particular class as his short stay in Merida might have encouraged him to form some of his own opinions.

³ Redfield (1941:372, n. 2) states that the description of Merida in Chapter II of *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* was prepared by Asael T. Hansen. I am inferring that the above statement means that Hansen wrote or is at least responsible for the contents of this chapter. When referring to Hansen in the present paper, I am, in effect, referring only to the contents of Chapter II in Redfield's *Folk Culture of Yucatan*.

Upper Class

Hansen (Redfield 1941:24, 25)

Redfield (p. 74)

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "descendants of the old aristocracy who have maintained their incomes at a fairly high level" 2. "persons of acceptable though less distinguished lineage who have achieved outstanding success in business or the professions" 3. "[characterized] by economic advantages" 4. "predominantly white ancestry" 5. "[characterized] by an approved amount and kind of education" 6. "[characterized] by a way of life expressive of its income" 7. "[characterized] by a way of life expressive of its long-established position as the elite" | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "old elements of pedigree . . . help to bring about admission to [the upper class]" 2. "new elements of personal success help to bring about admission to it" 3. "Recognition of the upper class now tends to emphasize wealth" |
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Middle Class

Hansen (Redfield 1941:24, 25)

Redfield (p. 74)

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|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "It is made up of people of 'good family' who are rather unsuccessful economically" 2. "It is made up of . . . people who have recently raised themselves from the lower class through wealth or professional achievement" 3. "It is made up of . . . people whose background is mixed or just so-so and who barely manage to hold their position" | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "composed of people cast off from the old upper class" 2. "composed of . . . new arrivals from the lower class. This group is, in general, identified with the occupations of moderate status — it is a 'white collar group' " 3. "Its members are on the frontiers of changing status; they tend to be strugglers, and they are less conservative than the people at the other social extremes" |
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Lower Class

Hansen (Redfield 1941:24, 25)

Redfield (p. 74)

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "those who work at the manual trades" 2. "Today, Maya surnames have lost much of their status meaning, and only the more conservative continue to wear mestizo clothes" 3. "descendants of the traditional lower class who have not been able or willing to climb above the position of their ancestors"; "Generally . . . members of the lower class show more evidence of Indian admixture than do persons of higher status" 4. "[those] who have small incomes" 5. [those] who have had little formal schooling" | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "those with the humblest occupations" 2. "although it is recognized that some who wear modern clothes belong to this class, those Meridanos who wear the folk costume are by that fact identified with inferior status" |
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A comparison of Redfield's and Hansen's description of Merida's upper class indicates that Redfield was mainly pointing out the elements necessary to gain admission to the class and that Hansen was defining the characteristics of the people within it. Both investigators seem to agree on the social makeup of the middle class, but it is interesting to note that Redfield did not refer to members of the upper and middle classes as displaying more evidence of Spanish admixture than members of the lower class.

To better demonstrate Merida's class structure and the ethnic and status groups within the classes, Redfield's (p. 84, Fig. 5) diagram summarizing them will be used.

PRESENT-DAY MERIDA

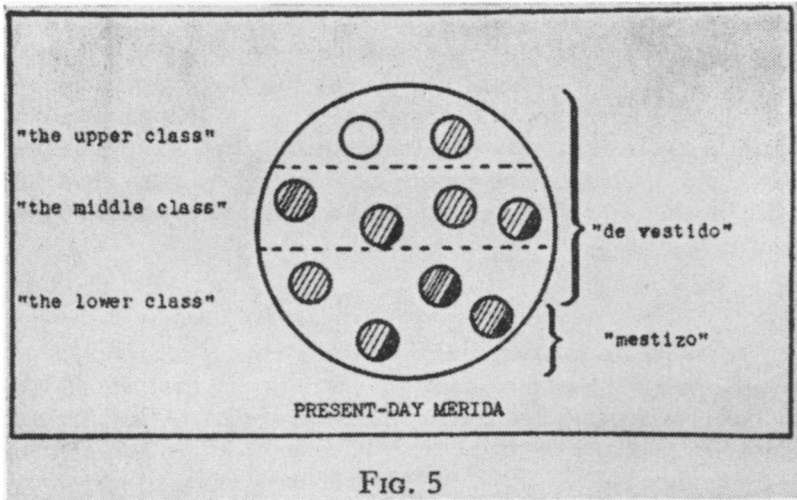


FIG. 5

In this diagram, the large circle represents Merida society. The broken parallel lines crossing it tentatively separate the society into three classes. The small blank circle represents individuals who are ethnically Spanish. Redfield used blacked-in circles to represent groups who are ethnically Maya but failed to indicate the signification of the circles with slanting lines, which at times have blank or blacked-in areas. But it can be inferred that they indicate which groups are ethnically described as being part Maya and Spanish.

Upper Class

In the diagram it is indicated that the Merida upper class is made up of two ethnic groups, Spanish and mixed Spanish and Maya, with no status differences between the two. The small circle on the right seems to represent a group that has more Spanish than Maya admixture, for instance, to the two higher status groups in the middle class, as the small blank space on the left side of the circle seems to indicate.

In 1941 Redfield recognized that various changes had occurred in the economic life and position of the wealthy in Merida since

he and Hansen did their field work (p. 372, n. 2). To bring his data up to date, the present writer notes that as of 1962 there are at least two status groups in Merida's upper class: the higher group includes the members of the old Catholic Spanish "aristocracy" who have retained most of their wealth and the lower group can, in general, be referred to as the *nouveau riche*. Although members of the *nouveau riche* may have more wealth than some members of the old aristocracy, the former enjoy a higher status than the latter if they are able to maintain a reasonable semblance of prosperity.

Middle Class

According to the diagram, the middle class is made up of an ethnic group that contains people who are an equal mixture of Maya and Spanish elements and another that has more Maya than Spanish admixture. Because of the vertical difference between the position of the former and the latter, the Maya-Spanish group is represented as having a higher status than the other.

As of 1962 several upper class people who lost much of their wealth due to a post-1934 agrarian reform now belong to the middle class, but they seem to possess slightly greater status than the highest status group in the middle class section of the diagram.

Lower Class

The lower class, according to the diagram, is made up of two ethnic groups and, although not clear, three or four status groups. The highest status group contains people who have an equal Maya-Spanish ethnic composition, as do the upper status people represented in the middle class section. The second to the highest status group is represented as containing people with more Maya than Spanish admixture, as are the two lowest status groups. The most obvious difference between the upper and lower status groups, as indicated in the diagram, is the use of the traditional costume by the latter and European dress by the former.

As of 1962 there seems to be little difference in the ethnic composition of the lower class or in the status position of the different groups, but the lower status groups seem to have a greater percentage of Maya admixture than represented in the diagram.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is difficult to reconcile Redfield's diagram with what he states in the text. He describes Yucatan as "a single society with classes, ethnically indistinct" (p. 58). He qualifies this statement when he says that the latter as well as other statements made previous to it "ignores, among other factors in the situation in Yucatan, the role played by social classes previously existing in the Spanish and Maya societies in determining, by force of tradition, the social classes which developed in the later Yucatecan societies" (p. 374, n. 2). But he chose to further ignore the effect of this traditional force when considering ethnic, class, and status differences in Merida.

His diagram seems to indicate clearly that ethnic differences are not "subordinate to class differences" (p. 79) nor has "the role of race in defining the classes [in Merida] . . . diminished almost to the vanishing point" (p. 75). Also to be reconsidered is Redfield's statement that Merida is "a single society, with social classes, racially indistinct" (p. 59). He seems to contradict himself when stating that "Ethnic differences [in Merida] are elements in the definition of the individual's position in fairly loose classes (Fig. 5)" (p. 83). Another statement points out that "For purposes of a title the word 'race' is convenient to refer to the original distinction between Spanish whites and Maya Indians *upon which most of the ethnic and class differences are based*"⁴ (p. 374, n. 1).

Redfield is right when stating that "occupation, costume, or place of residence [are] . . . relatively more significant *signs* of social distinction than . . . race or general culture"⁵ (p. 58) but not nearly as justified when stating that "the old, rigid class system of Merida, with its connotations of racial difference, has broken down and nearly disappeared" (p. 74). It is difficult to believe that "a status classification based on ethnic consideration is not to be seen" (p. 83). One has only to examine Redfield's Fig. 5 to note a contradiction; for example, Merida's middle or lower class where individuals possessing less Maya ethnic elements form a group that has a higher status than the others.

⁴ Italics added.

⁵ Italics added.

