

Independent, Inexperienced, and Disorganized Political Life in Mexico (1821-1855)

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The Mexican Republic in the first half of the nineteenth century.

I will attempt here to briefly sketch like in an impressionist painting what I think determined events in Mexico between 1821 and 1855. Many topics could be tackled in doing this, but given the need to pick among the most representative, I have opted to single out the vicissitudes of those in power in their attempts to consolidate the Mexican state. I will also look at the time and space where all this

happened, giving geography its place: the changes in territoriality, both internal and those due to external threats. I include the ups and downs of the economy, and a consideration about the criollos, who held the affairs of their recently unveiled country in their hands. These issues have been part of my concerns and love for historical research and what I have written about up to now. This is where most of these reflections stem from.

Mexican historiography of the first half of the nineteenth century was concerned with pointing out the terrible “national ills” that afflicted Mexico from 1821 on. This vi-

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sion of continuous failures—in each case written from a different perspective—contrasts with that of the historians of the last decades of the same century. The latter had been lucky enough to witness the outcome of the history of revolutions and barracks revolts typical of Mexico after independence. Armed with the victory of the 1867 Republic and the order and progress that it brought, they quickly dubbed the previous period “the years of anarchy.”

Mexicans who lived through those turbulent days saw the creation of a constitutional monarchy with the regency that preceded it, three constitutions (the 1824 Federalist Constitution, later reformed in 1846; the so-called Constitution of the Seven Laws of 1835, and the Organic Bases of 1843), which respectively sanctioned the existence of two federal republics and two centralized republics, and many governments based on political plans or administrative schemes, some of which turned into true dictatorships. Except for Guadalupe Victoria (1824-1828), none of the presidents served

out their full terms. For this reason, interim or substitute presidents became unavoidable; most of those who sat in the president’s chair were military men, and not a few, whether military or civilian, sat in it more than once, regardless of whether they had previously espoused an opposite set of principles to get there. The different Constitutions gave more power to Congress out of

fear of despotism, so the presidents resorted to using extraordinary powers. For its part, the judicial branch was never a counterweight to the executive or the legislature.

It is impossible in so few pages to deal with each administration and its vicissitudes. Suffice it to say that between 1821 and 1855, the chief executive changed more than 30 times, with the resulting changes in ministers of state. This gives us an average of one president or executive power per year. They tried all forms of government, only to find to their confusion that none of them worked. The issues debated for decades were about whether they should be republicans or monarchists; followers of Iturbide or the Bourbons, of York or the Scots; federalists or centralists; representative democrats or oligarchs; liberals or conservatives (including all the possible degrees of each); and, among other things, small property owners or in favor of communal property.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Mexico’s territory extended to the 42nd parallel to the north and to the border with Belize and Guatemala to the south. Only during the time of the First Empire was Mexico united with

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the country Central America, but it separated after Agustín Iturbide’s abdication in March 1823. At the time independence was achieved, the population is estimated to have been six million, very badly distributed over that vast territory. And soon, that huge expanse was subjected to colonizing, expansionist interests that led to the loss of more than half of it (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, La Mesilla) between 1836 and 1854.

By mid-century, the Mexican republic had a population of 7,661,919, of whom 200,000 lived in the capital. Approximately four million were indigenous, and the remaining 3.5 million were a minority European and criollo, and a majority mestizo. Eighty percent of the population lived in poverty. Both internal and external borders were in constant flux. There was a frontier between “whites” and indigenous; between Mexicans and foreigners; between barbarians and the civilized; between sedentary people and nomads; between individuals and communities; between owners and the dispossessed; and between some owners and others. The new dividing line to the North was finally fixed at the Rio Grande



Antonio López de Santa Anna, the caudillo who was in power several times between 1833 and 1855.



J. S. Hegi, *The Cathedral and the Promenade of the Chains on Thursday of Easter Week*, 1854.

or Río Bravo in 1856, the year in which the agreement both countries signed in 1848 ending the war between Mexico and the United States was ratified.

The most complete expression of the indigenous and peasant rebellions in defense of their communal lands and their autonomy—which took place all over the country—in the period occupying us here was Yucatán’s Caste War. For “people of reason,” it was a true struggle between two different races, in which they argued that the indigenous were the ones who abhorred the “whites” because they did not want to submit to “white” laws of order and sociability. The whites feared this confrontation more than the invasion of the “Indian barbarians” from the North, whose outrages were seen as a struggle between barbarism and civilization, or, rather, between “property” and the pillaging of the nomadic tribes.¹ In the end, those who maintained the need for individual property would prevail, believing, like Manuel Payno, that “from the moment that the brigand has consummated his attack against property and has received its fruit, he is the new owner.”²

The economy fluctuated between a ban on imports that affected commerce, protecting the incipient textile industry, and, on the other hand, supporting free trade, heedless of the country’s industrialization. Mexico exported silver, hemp, cochineal grain, logwood, indigo, vanilla, and sugar; it imported almost everything it needed, plus luxury items. Mining,

which had declined during the War for Independence, bounced back a little with the investment of English capital. Since there was no money in the public coffers, taxes and fees were increased. The country was indebted internally and abroad, which led to Mexico’s weakness and impotency in the face of foreign interests—and our country sought recognition abroad—manifested not only in the military invasions of Spain (1829), France (1838), and the United States (1846-1848), but also in aggressive political and economic expansionism and interventionism. Since there were no banks or institutions of credit, loans and foreign currency operations were always in the hands of loan sharks who speculated to the country’s detriment; and not only individuals fell into their clutches, but even government businesses. The disinterest of the majority of Mexicans accustomed them to political convulsions, military revolts, barracks uprisings, foreign invasions, national and foreign wars, and filibusterism. The meager public budget was used to pay and maintain an army that beleaguered the country more than defended it, and fund the wages of the government bureaucracy, which found a way to thrive on the taxpayer’s money and, as Miguel Lerdo de Tejada pointed out, helped propagate anarchistic ideas.³

For their part, those in government were more interested in politics than in culture, education, or the country’s economy. In the opinion of historian Luis González, “After three decades of independent life, Mexico, trounced, ragged, without

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any national cohesion, without peace, could only display with pride its intellectuals.”⁴ He was referring to José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, to Manuel Eduardo de Gorostiza, to Andrés Quintana Roo, to José Joaquín Pesado, to Manuel Carpio in the front line, plus Bustamante, Mora, Zavala, and Alamán. And he added the importance of journalism as a genre, which ranged from the time of *El Sol* and *El Águila*, to that of *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, *El Monitor Republicano*, *El Tiempo*, and *El Universal*.

The lack of government can be explained in part by the situation of the clergy and the army. The vast economic power of the Mexican Catholic Church has already been pointed out, in addition to its unrelenting influence in Mexicans' legal, social, moral, and spiritual matters. Its being a true rival for political power allowed it to use its economic wealth to support or bring down governments. On the other hand, the ills plaguing the army included, among other things, its upwardly-mobile, ambitious, privileged officer class. They came from having fought for the interests of the Spanish Crown, and then, from just joining the independence pact proposed by Agustín de Iturbide. Their favorite pastime was making revolutions in which they always won more promotions and prerogatives. Some authors have argued that that period was the time when caudillos reigned supreme, and this could also describe the mid-century. For Lucas Alamán, conservative politician and historian, the panorama of government in Mexico from 1822 to 1853 could be summed up in eight words: “the history of the revolutions of Santa Anna.”⁵ While it is true that Santa Anna was the victorious caudillo, this is partially the case because the other contenders (Agustín de Iturbide, Anastasio Bustamante, and Mariano Paredes, among many others) gave him plenty of room in the struggle for power, which almost always included disavowing rivals; alliances, some truly remarkable and contradictory; confrontations on the battlefield; and, finally, the proposal of new pacts that were unlikely to be lived up to.

The optimism of 1821 ended by fading away only three decades later. In his resignation from the presidency in Jan-



Agustín I, emperor of Mexico from 1822 to 1823. He became famous, however, as one of the liberators of Mexico.

uary 1853, moderate liberal Mariano Arista listed the ills plaguing the country: maritime customs offices invaded by contraband; the disappearance of tax monies in many places; the destruction of the government monopoly over tobacco; the rise in internal and foreign debt; deficit-ridden agriculture; an illiterate majority; rural workers living in conditions of servitude; military officers who soaked up the little money in the public coffers; a reactionary, hoarding clergy; multiple caste wars and the failure to contain the “barbarian Indians”; a lack of police forces; the absence of morals in public administration; and, above all, political instability. The liberals never stopped seeking progress for Mexico, with a project that underlined the need to become a federal, representative, popular republic, eliminating the privileges of the corporations by selling their goods, inviting foreigners to colonize and work unoccupied lands, subjecting the power of the clergy to the state, with a tamed army, and looking to the United States as the model to follow.

To find some sort of a remedy to these ills, around 1853 the conservatives also insisted on the importance of progress, but with their own vision of things. For them, progress could only be attained if material improvements were introduced. They saw the country as an organism with no arteries. So they proposed building roads, funded by private companies' investments. They also fostered colonization by foreign, Catholic workers, who, together with the new roads, would renovate the country's broken-down agriculture. They proposed providing guarantees for labor and industry. In the field of politics, they dreamed of a monarchy, for which they sought the support of Europe, sustained by a powerful army and clergy. However, although they tried to order the existing legislation and to reform the administration, they achieved little because the flighty government that protected them (the sixth and last headed by Antonio López de Santa Anna) was ephemeral. Though given broad faculties, these were not sufficient for containing a liberal revolution begun by the moderates, known as the Ayutla Revolution (because it began in a town of that name), which took place between 1854 and 1855 and marked a change of direction of the history of power, in which criollo caudillos would no longer have any place.

The historiography of the late nineteenth century contributed greatly to forging the myth of a consolidated nation after the victory of the liberals in 1867. This is a fundamental doctrine of the contemporary Mexican state, whose reason for being has been to harmonize the enormous jigsaw puzzle that had existed since time immemorial. However, this unifying process undoubtedly began before Mexico became independent from Spain, and in 1821 took on new vigor. Both liberals and conservatives proposed integrating what the evangelizers called the "indigenous nations," through individual property, the Spanish language, political centralism, and Catholicism.

From then on, several symbols key to our national being were created, which, in addition to the four matters I just mentioned, were an important symbolic, discursive legacy of that Mexican state founded by the criollos between 1821 and 1855. I am referring to the flag and its coat of arms, the celebration of the "cry of Independence" ceremony on September 15, the national anthem, and, among other things, the reinforcement of other symbols from the religious sphere like the cult of Guadalupe, inherited from the so-called New Spain, criollo nationalism. The generation that lived through Independence and tried to form its own government gave the territory they

were born in a name and new borders, but, above all, it gave birth to a language and a political way of being that continues to be in force and is one of the most important components of that complex weave that identifies us as Mexicans. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ In Spanish, the word for "property" is also the word for "propriety," thus indicating the close relationship between being an owner and being proper. [Translator's Note.]
- ² Manuel Payno, *Tratado de la propiedad*, facsimile of the 1869 first edition (Mexico City: Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria, 1981), p. 13.
- ³ "Carta de Miguel Lerdo de Tejada a Antonio López de Santa Anna, abril de 1853," Carlos J. Sierra, *Miguel Lerdo de Tejada (1821-1861)* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Prensa, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 1961), p. 22.
- ⁴ Luis González, "El periodo formativo," *Historia mínima de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1974), p. 103.
- ⁵ Lucas Alamán, *Historia de Méjico desde los primeros movimientos que prepararon su Independencia en el año de 1808 hasta la época presente*, vol. 5, facsimile of the 1852 Lara edition (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica/Instituto Cultural Helénico, 1985), p. 686.

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