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# National Popular Politics in Early Independent Mexico, 1820-1847

Torcuato S. Di Tella

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## Preface

I have been driven to the study of the early nineteenth-century Mexican labyrinth as a result of my search for clues to an understanding of Latin American politics, from the perspective of a sociologist with historical and comparative inclinations. But then, why concentrate on a single case? In the field of comparative sociology, it is necessary to try out new approaches, as the methodology is in the making and continually evolving. I could have taken four or five historical processes, using mostly secondary literature, and tried to establish similarities and contrasts among them. This is a valid approach, known to have given excellent results. But comparatists must also try their hand at the study in depth of a single case, so as to have a better look at the trees in the forest, getting involved with the vagaries and contradictions of the local scene. Of course given time, patience, and resources, it is possible to bestow this treatment not only on one but on several instances. Indeed this is necessary, but it need not be done in the same book, nor even by the same person.

In my analysis of the Mexican situation during the early decades of the republic, I have always kept in mind contrasting experiences both from the area and period considered and from outside of them. In a previous work, I tried to develop a general framework for the study of Latin American politics. I do not intend to inflict a summary of it on the unsuspecting reader, but of course I will use it and explain that use when necessary, tucking into footnotes the more complex references. I believe that the comparative method, nay more, theory building in general, must be capable of expressing its results in a plain language. But on the other hand, tentatively at least, some classificatory frameworks or schemata should be developed, in which to nest empirical materials and lower-level generalizations, so that results might be additive and open to easier contrast.

I have been working on Mexican history for quite a long time, moving

back and forth between it and other research and theoretical endeavors. I have published in part the results of these efforts, and in this book I refer to them only tangentially. I have tried to see Mexican events as a sample, so to speak, of what was happening in other parts of Latin America. Not that the situation was similar everywhere; rather the contrary. Mexico was at one extreme of variation, due to its sheer size, the severity of its decay, and the violence of its attempts at independence. In spite of the differences, however, in analyzing a given Mexican political phenomenon I often had the impression of observing, with a magnifying glass and in changed circumstances, the behavior of familiar actors.

The period comes to an abrupt end with the American war: afterward, things could never be the same. One is tempted to invert a well-known phrase, and say that what had earlier been a comedy, became after the war a tragedy. Actually it had always been a tragedy, beginning with the massacres of the Insurgencia and including the frustrating changes of government, legal and otherwise, during the intervening decades.

My focus of interest is the connection between the class structure and the political system, particularly the factions, parties, and corporative and ideological groups vying for power and entering into the most complex and bewildering alliances. The pattern of these alliances (too often attributed to personality traits or sheer opportunism) is a central theme of study and so is the degree and form of popular participation in what appeared to be the war of all against all. I was particularly attracted by the prevalence of political coalitions that included as an essential part of their formula an element of popular participation. These combinations could be liberal or conservative, clerical or anticlerical, or (to use only partially anachronistic terms) of the Right or Left. The prevalence of military interventions, together with the less emphasized incapacity of the system to generate a solid dictatorship (in contrast with other Latin American cases) contributed to my fascination with it.

During the period studied, mainly the years between 1820 and 1834, with occasional glances to the 1840s, a definite cyclical pattern emerges, its causes being traceable to three main characteristics: the contraposition between protectionist and free-trading interests; the high level of popular menace hanging over the heads of the upper classes; and the overarching economic and ideological role of the church.

These three characteristics were present in Mexico, in the first part of the nineteenth century, to a much higher degree than in practically any other part of Latin America. One can think of countries and periods when one or the other of the above-named traits existed, but not to such a high

degree, and particularly not all of them together. The presence of these three factors produced a wide assortment of social actors and a seemingly endless series of coalition making and unmaking. Outcomes depended on combinations of events, personalities, and international conjunctures. But given the basic data, political changes were bound to follow certain patterns, independently of the individuals involved. It was difficult to have a political vocation or a political responsibility thrown on one's shoulders in those days, and posterity has not been kind to most contemporary practitioners. Maybe it is time for some compassion, if not rehabilitation, as the basis for a better understanding.

In the following pages, it will be easy to discern the influence of the social scientists Richard Adams, David Apter, Oscar Cornblit, Karl Deutsch, Gino Germani, Helio Jaguaribe, Seymour Martin Lipset, José Nun, Guillermo O'Donnell, Bryan Roberts, Stein Rokkan, Alfred Stepan, and Charles Tilly. Among historians I owe many insights to Nettie Lee Benson, David Brading, Germán Carrera Damas, Enrique Florescano, Moisés González Navarro, Luis González y González, Tulio Halperín Donghi, Herbert Klein, Enrique Semo, and Eric Van Young, not to mention the whole dedicated cohort of Mexicanists, too long to enumerate here. My assistants, Patricia Chomnalez and Adriana Novoa, provided much-needed conversation and fresh ideas. My two stays in Texas, at the Institute of Latin American Studies in Austin, in 1988 and 1990, were essential for the completion of this work, begun too long ago to remember, during a prolonged residence in London and Oxford, whose large repositories of tract literature often disturbed my sleep and made me dream of passions and hopes astonishingly similar to those of our own times.

## Introduction

In order to unravel the tangled yarn of early independent Mexican politics, it is necessary to begin with a consideration of the chasm that separated the upper from the lower classes. Nobody denies the existence of this chasm; but what is open to discussion is its magnitude, the relevance of the intermediate sectors, and the degree to which the popular strata could channel their antagonisms into political action. The very violent nature of the Insurgencia makes it impossible to overlook the fact of popular participation, and recent scholarship has pointed to the prevalence of mass violence in the early stages of political development, both in Mexico and elsewhere, adopting a perspective "from below" to compensate for the more classical study of the elites. This approach must be complemented, though, with an analysis of what happened at the level of the middle strata: how numerous they were, how estranged from the dominant order, and how determined to get involved in unorthodox alliances. An excessive concern with violence and revolution leaves out of consideration a significant aspect of the political scene. The conflicts between Escoceses and Yorkinos and their numerous offshoots and transmutations did not contrapose actors across a simple class line, but they did have an important anchorage in the class structure, if the latter is properly interpreted and subdivided. This was obvious to contemporary observers and has also been pointed out by an early generation of sociologically inclined historians. Thus Luis Chávez Orozco referred to the Yorkinos as "the party of the people, of the ... impoverished middle class, of the miserable rabble," contraposed to the "interests of the feudal and militarist sector, supported by the deceived rural masses." <sup>1</sup> Much earlier the British minister, Henry Ward, saw the Yorkinos as very dangerous, attributing to the faction twelve thousand "affiliés," conjuring up, by giving them that name, scenes from the French revolution.<sup>2</sup> Though

a bipolar characterization oversimplifies the issue, the conflicts involved are central to an understanding of the Mexican predicament and often were not much less violent than those emerging from the many local peasant uprisings of the time. It is true that some of the major upheavals, like the Insurgencia, spread mostly among the rural population, but one should not underrate the role of the urban masses as bases of populist, if not revolutionary, politics. 3

Marxist analyses of this type of situation were for many years marred by their excessive concern with class consciousness, which it is difficult to assign to peasants and urban laborers in preindustrial times. More recent studies in this theoretical field, under the influence of the pioneering work of Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson, have revised that rigid orthodoxy. Popular participation has thus been revalued, regardless of ideology, especially when it involves violence. What is necessary now is to complement this new vision with an equally open one for the less violent forms of such popular participation. These range from voting, joining political clubs, and assiduous reading of (or listening to) newspapers and pamphlets, to serving in the militia or getting involved in street demonstrations, strikes, and rioting: in other words, the usual arsenal of nineteenth-century Latin American politics, with the addition of military interventions and influence peddling or corruption of officials. In this obscure and unsung experience, political parties were formed and constitutional traditions forged, while a widening of participation took place.

The violent substratum of politics, always present (though usually at quite a few removes) in any society, was very near the surface in Latin America, and especially so in Mexico at the time of independence. This was the result of the peculiar nature of the Conquest and the ensuing superposition of races and cultures. In spite of this, and of the initial confrontations with the *encomenderos*, during most of the colonial era the crown did not need much of a regular army to keep order in its colonies. Admittedly the church had created a high degree of consensus across classes, and many colonials were armed in defense of the established order, but it is surprising that the various factions of the dominant classes were not at each other's throats more often. Probably it was the magnitude of the potential threat under which they lived that brought them to their senses and instilled in them a feeling of solidarity and a loyalty to the royal government, a feeling also shared by the intermediate strata. However, when the crown (or international economic and military forces) introduced serious alterations that affected business or

bureaucratic interests, widespread revolts erupted. This happened during the Gálvez re-

forms of the 1760s and, on a colossal scale, in Peru and Upper Peru during the 1780s. As a result of these internal tensions, in addition to international conflicts, the regular army experienced a notable expansion in New Spain after the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The mechanism of civil society's violent resistance to changes often occurred in two stages. First, sectors of the elites, feeling their interests severely threatened by government action, reacted strongly in defense of their interests, come what may. Once the united front of dominant-class social control was thus broken, the usually subdued tensions from the underworld could more easily erupt. This happened on a limited scale in New Spain at the time of Gálvez, but became a major catastrophe in Peru, where disaffection among the white and mestizo populations helped trigger the Túpac Amaru rebellion. In a not too different situation, the disruption caused by the French Revolution between white and mulatto settlers in Saint Domingue (Haiti) opened the gates to slave insurrection. In Brazil things were different, because there the Portuguese authorities, not necessarily out of foresight, had since at least the Methuen treaty of 1703 opened their kingdom to British interests, thus allowing more time for a gradual adaptation to the new international economy. In New Spain the opposite was the case, and this, added to the Consolidación and other ill-advised measures, created such havoc among the elites that many of them became decidedly disloyal to the status quo. Still in Mexico the upper classes, centered on the capital, expressed their opposition only mildly, during the Iturrigaray episode of 1808. Lower sectors of the dominant classes, however, especially provincials and the middle classes, were more ready to resort to extreme measures, which ignited the powder keg.

### Forms of Popular Participation

Since the Insurgencia, one could ignore the possibility of violence in everyday life and in politics only at one's grievous risk. Politics became, more than ever before, the continuation of civil war by other means, which included scarcely veiled appeals to violence or ritual invocations or exercises of it in militia training, in elections, and in a strongly worded press. To what extent was there mass participation in all of this? Contemporary observers, often participants, of various shades of opinion, from Alamán to Zavala, Mora to Bustamante, Tornel or Zerecero, consistently emphasized the strategic role of the masses in the political process. One of the objects of the present inquiry is to see how and why



those masses had to be taken into account, because it cannot be said that in all preindustrial or premodern societies popular participation in politics was as high as it was in Mexico. Though the level of participation, or the necessity to take into account wide sectors of the population, has probably been higher in most historical instances than is usually realized, in some cases it was markedly important. In New Spain the nature of the Conquest bequeathed a potential for popular violence to the dominant order, which made the control of these tensions an affair of the first priority. The concentration of the population in rather large cities, in mines, and in other centers of production, and the nature of rural-urban migrations, all helped generate an available mass ready for incorporation into episodes of violence. At the same time, economic and international upheavals beginning in the late eighteenth century had created the conditions for intense factional behavior among the dominant classes, making them blind to the dangers of agitating the masses. Involved, against better counsels, in this risky business, the elites eventually acquired some expertise in the art of channelling and controlling a crowd.

In other words: violence being always around the corner, it was necessary for any political group, even in peaceful and constitutional times, to flex its muscles and be in readiness for direct action at any moment. "Direct action" was basically of two types: one involved appealing to the military, the other to the people. The latter was particularly strategic in an era when one man could rather easily provide himself with a gun and eventually a horse and become a good match for a trained soldier. But how to appeal to the people convincingly enough to make them risk their tranquility and eventually their lives? Some special inducements had to be provided, from the grossest to the noblest kind. Maybe it was enough to distribute a few *reales*, or to provide opportunities for plunder. But as for the latter, not everyone could risk encouraging it, particularly those who had something to lose, or with wealthy friends and backers.

On the other hand, looking at things from the popular side, we must explore a wider gamut of motivations for violent or semiviolent action than those involving immediate economic gain. Some sectors of the population were more readily accessible than others and would respond to different stimuli. Politicians had to cultivate an audience, through charismatic or other forms of personal appeal, and feed their followers with ideas or at least some motives for enthusiasm. It was also necessary for them to exercise their troops occasionally; hence the party press, the gatherings and street agitations, the

enrollment in the militia, the show of strength and counting of numbers (at least of the brave) on election day,

and so forth. All these things were meaningful, not necessarily in terms of the constitution (that is, for the purpose of forming a majority in Congress or getting a president elected), but rather as preparation for civil strife if the situation arose. That is to say, it was not always enough, if one wished to topple or to defend a government, to have recourse to the military; it might be sufficient in some circumstances, but not in others. And in all cases, the availability of potentially armed people in the streets could go a long way toward making up the minds of the military or of other influential sectors of society. The people were not kingmakers, but they did play a role in the kingmaking process. They could, consciously or not, set some rules and requirements for those who would attempt to use them. It was only a participation of sorts, but still participation after all.

### The Dangerous Classes: Which Ones?

Mexico had a large component of "dangerous classes" in its population, some quite visible, especially the *léperos* in the large cities, the miners, and the socially mobilized Indians, uprooted from their communities. There is no doubt that these groups were menacing; my hypothesis, though, is that the really dangerous ones were the middle classes. It would be out of place here to go into a discussion as to what constitutes a class, or how to define a middle position within the stratification pyramid. But within the social hierarchy there are lines of discontinuity at different levels. A very important, though often fuzzy, line of separation generally runs between manual workers (urban or rural) without property or control of a means of production, and others, who are situated above them. As there are many doubtful cases, to which one must add incongruent locations (high in one dimension and low in another), it may be convenient here to refer to some special problems.

First, in the urban sector, below the line, factory workers, artisans without a shop of their own, service personnel of various kinds, and the host of street vendors and marginals formed the bulk of the lower classes. Above the line, foremen, shop-keeping artisans or small traders, and white-collar employees formed what may be called a middle class. Needless to say, there are always straddlers, such as the classical well-paid artisan without a shop of his own, or the equally familiar scribbler unable to pay his bills. Self-employed people were below the line when they came near to being street vendors or marginals, while in other cases they had a position similar to that of a small shopkeeper, above the line.



Second, in the rural sector, the salaried *peones* were below the line, as were many subsistence agriculturists, even if they rented or owned (individually or collectively) a patch of land. Small property holders, renters or even squatters, and some members of Indian *pueblos* who managed to occupy a position of privilege within their communities were above the line.

The existence of a middle class, and the internal stratification within each group, became more evident the closer one looked at them. Local statisticians, like Ciríaco Iturribarría in a study of San Luis Potosí, included among the middle class the *dependientes de comercio* and the *maestros* of the main trades, such as silversmiths, carpenters, blacksmiths, and shoemakers. By contrast Mariano Otero, a well-to-do liberal writer and politician, in an analysis of social stratification in Mexico, argued that a class that could properly be called upper did not exist or was too weak, and he designated as proletarian all those who did not have other resources than "mercenary work." He reserved the use of "middle class" for those who "represent the greatest sum of wealth, including all the professions which cultivate the intellect." Obviously Otero had a very peculiar definition of the middle class, including only what we would call today the bourgeoisie, or upper middle class. In fact he was pointing to another line of relative discontinuity within the social pyramid, namely, that which divided the middle classes into a lower and an upper layer, the latter enjoying better and more secure positions, through property, business, the professions, or important jobs in private or public administration, the church, or the armed forces. In a similar vein to that of Otero, Baron von Humboldt and Bishop Abad y Queipo tended to see only extremes of wealth and misery, which probably was a commonplace observation in well-educated circles at the time. 4

This dichotomous view reflected the weakness of an upper middle class, that is, of people who might be the interlocutors of those highly placed observers. The lower middle classes, both urban and rural, suffered from penury and frightful insecurity, so that in a sense they could be seen as living in misery. But they and those below them were very conscious of the differences. Guillermo Prieto, who had known hard times in his youth, saw that the populace "had its hierarchies, its nobility, its aristocracy." Artisans, and the politicians who sought their support, were quite conscious of the differences between a maestro and a worker in a factory, who was assimilated to an *oficial*, that is, a non-shop-owning artisan who worked in a dependent position. During a discussion in 1829 in the Puebla congress, a deputy

expressed the fear that the conversion from