CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

CHAPTER I

Introduction: National politics and the populist tradition

D. A. BRADING

I

In December 1914 the two popular heroes of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, led their troops through the streets of the Capital. In festive mood, the two men, the one a former horse-dealer from Morelos, the other a one-time bandit from Chihuahua, entered the National Palace to pose for photographs, Villa sprawling nervously in the Presidential chair. Outside the crowds acclaimed the arrival of their forces as a relief from the extortions of the Constitutionalist army led by Alvaro Obregón and Venustiano Carranza. Indeed, at first sight the Zapatistas, mainly Indian peasants who paraded with the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe, appeared more like beggars than revolutionaries. However, political executions and drunken quarrels soon disturbed the initial harmony and Rodolfo Fierro, Villa's chief lieutenant, lived up to his brutal reputation by assassinating two civilian politicians who had dared oppose his master. Elsewhere in the Republic local caudillos dominated the states; the American marines occupied Veracruz; and in the hills about Córdoba and Orizaba the Constitutionalist army prepared for the next round of battles. The puppet president chosen by the Convention of Aguascalientes, Eulalio Gutiérrez, was powerless to influence the course of events. At this pivotal moment in the history of the Revolution command of military power was the key to success. After all, the basis of admittance to the Convention had been rifle-power: any self-appointed colonel or general with at least a thousand men under his command was assured of a place. Intellectuals entered the debates as the representatives of these soldiers.[1] If we accept Trotsky's dictum that the soviet was the decisive institution of the Russian Revolution, then with equal justice it could be said that in Mexico the essential social force which dominated the Revolution was the armed band and its caudillo.[2]

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

Reflecting upon this period in his memoirs, José Vasconcelos, the brilliant intellectual who had served in the Gutiérrez cabinet as Secretary of Education, bitterly commented that Mexico had then returned to the days of Santa-Anna and the caudillos of the early nineteenth century: 'Once more figures like Sarmiento's *Facundo* walked the land.' In another passage, after a disdainful description of a northern *vaquero*, with his tight leather breeches and monstrously broad sombrero, he wrote: 'perhaps this is the real Mexico, rather than the European veneer we see in the cities.[3] Nowhere was the compound of fear and fascination engendered by these rural chieftains better caught than by Martín Luis Guzmán in his image of Villa as 'more of a jaguar than a man . . . a jaguar tamed, for the moment, for our work . . . a jaguar whose back we stroked with trembling hand, fearful that at any moment a paw might strike us down'.[4]

The sudden appearance of leaders like Villa and Zapata at the very centre of the revolutionary struggle proved all the more unnerving for the educated class of townsmen in that only four years before, in September 1910, the Mexican Government had invited diplomatic legations from across the world to witness the centennial celebrations of the *Grito de Dolores*. The purpose of the lavish round of festivities and ceremonies was more to pay homage to the achievements of President Porfirio Díaz than to commemorate Miguel Hidalgo, the country vicar who had first raised the banner of the Guadalupe against the Spanish Crown. For since 1876, when Díaz first seized power, Mexico had enjoyed the twin blessings of political stability and economic progress. To give but a few figures, exports during the Porfiriato (as the period 1876–1910 is known) increased sixfold in value, with the composition diversified to include industrial metals and tropical crops as well as the traditional shipments of bullion. A start was made on the mechanisation of manufactures, the textile industry taking an early lead in the employment of hydro-electric power. Equally important, the rate of population increase slowly edged forward, with overall numbers rising from just under 9.5 million in 1876 to over 15 million in 1910.[5] Needless to say, the growth of these years was not uniformly distributed across the Republic. The Northern states lining the American frontier, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila and New León, hitherto sparsely peopled and backward, more than doubled their population and greatly expanded their range of economic activity. The only areas to exhibit comparable dynamism were the coastal state of Veracruz and the Federal District of Mexico City which on the eve of the Revolution housed about 750,000 inhabitants.[6]

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

This emphasis on the statistics of economic growth reflects contemporary opinion. At the very outset of the period Manuel de Zamacona, a liberal journalist, vented his enthusiasm in these striking words: 'Railways will resolve all the political, social and economic problems which the patriotism, sacrifice and blood of two generations failed to settle.'[7] A group of intellectuals who proudly dubbed themselves Científicos, emerged as the chief proponents of this view. Weary of the jacobin abstractions of their forebears, they turned to Comtian Positivism and hailed Porfirio Díaz as the inaugurator of the industrial, scientific stage of Mexican history. 'Convinced that the economic system irresistably commands the political system and that to change the latter it was necessary to change the former', the Científicos accepted the Porfirian dictatorship as the inevitable instrument of material progress.[8] Brought into office after their support for the re-election of Díaz in 1892, these conservative liberals soon made themselves indispensable both as administrators and as propagandists. At the Treasury José Yves Limantour finally succeeded in balancing the budget and after 1893 reaped a fiscal surplus sufficient to enable the government both to purchase control of the main railway lines and to renegotiate the national debt.[9] In short, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Mexican state possessed the resources to make its authority respected both at home and abroad. Even a critic of the Porfiriato admitted that 'in its structure and stability the country found the definitive formula of national government'.[10]

Here, then, is the central problem of the Mexican Revolution. How was it possible for a country so firmly embarked on the path of economic development to descend so rapidly into such an archaic type of political anarchy? How did the republic fall prey to armed bands recruited in the backlands and the countryside? One obvious answer to the question is to invoke the lessons of the past. It can be argued that despite the efflorescence of the export economy, rural society and its political culture remained unchanged. With the dissolution of the national state during the revolution, the country simply returned to the pattern of endemic civil war and chronic banditry which had dominated its life from the *Grito de Dolores* until the accession of Díaz. When Zapata took up arms, he followed family tradition, since his uncles had fought for the Liberals under Díaz and his grandfather for Morelos against the Crown.[11] Similarly, when he and his brother Eufemio decked themselves in the finery of a *charro*, they echoed the style of a famous group of nineteenth-century bandits, *los plateados de tierra caliente.*[12] Along with Spain and the Balkan states, Mexico was the classic country of banditry. It

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

is no coincidence that the three most popular novels written in nineteenth-century Mexico all numbered thieves and smugglers among their leading characters.[13] If Vasconcelos could condemn the revolutionary scene by a comparison with the Argentine past, it was surely because, unlike its Southern cousin, Mexico had yet to experience any significant alteration in the pattern of rural society.

Unfortunately, despite its attraction, such an interpretation does not easily accord with the known facts of Mexican history. In Argentina, certainly, the political elite of Buenos Aires failed to create a national state after Independence, with the result that power devolved to the provincial caudillos. Indeed, José Ingenieros argued that the patriarchal structure of agrarian society, in which landowners exercised feudal authority over their peons and gauchos, virtually demanded the elevation of caudillos, men who, despite their reputation for violence, acted as the political agents of local landed families.[14] In Mexico the situation was far more complex. For there the Insurgency against the Spanish Crown was led by country priests and provincial gentry who mobilised the rural masses to the point where their movement came to resemble a peasant jacquerie. With the first leaders executed, the remaining insurgent bands were mainly headed by 'field labourers, mayordomos and muleteers', men as much given to banditry as to warfare.[15] But it should be emphasised that the Insurgency was defeated by a royalist army raised for the most part in New Spain, staffed and led by young Creoles who adopted the ethos and career of the professional army officer. It was the same royalist army which engineered Independence in 1821 and which, once the tumultuous decade of the 1820s was past, effectively governed Mexico until the Liberal Reforma.[16]

True, deep within the mountainous periphery of the central plateau, old insurgents like Juan Alvarez in Guerrero and new rebels like Manuel Lozada in Narayit established autonomous fiefdoms.[17] For two generations this breed of regional, backwoods caciques continued to struggle against the military hegemony of the regular army. As much as in the Argentine of Rosas and Facundo, Mexico experienced an open conflict between city and wilderness. But in this case Mexico City, supported by the network of provincial capitals, leading mining towns and the port of Veracruz, possessed sufficient resources to maintain the ostensible structure of a national state. In particular, it was the survival of the cadre of former royalist officers, from whom were recruited virtually all Presidents during the years

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

1829–55, which guaranteed the exclusion of mere caciques from high political office.

Even during the Three Years War of the Reforma (1858–61) when the leading regional caciques combined to defeat the remnants of the regular army led by the young colonels Miramón and Osollo, it was the progressive urban elite – lawyers, ideologues, and former state governors – who retained the leadership of the victorious coalition.[18] If Mexico City, Puebla, and the central valleys remained obdurately conservative, Guadalajara, Zacatecas and Veracruz were bastions of the liberal cause. Moreover, the strife of these years, followed by the French Intervention on behalf of the Emperor Maximilian, consolidated the reputation of Benito Juárez, the Indian lawyer from Oaxaca, who slowly revived the authority of the Presidency. Circumventing the boundaries of the written constitution, Juárez sought to convert his office into an informal, elective monarchy which would become the nodal point of national identity.[19] In short, the Mexican state was first re-created in the persons of Juárez and Díaz. Needless to say, this consolidation of the central executive was accompanied by the emergence of powerful state governors and district caciques. The original political base of the Porfirian regime consisted of the generals who had led the Liberal army against the French.

The obvious lessons which an acute political analyst might derive from the nineteenth century were spelt out with customary brutality by Francisco Bulnes, the literary hatchet-man of the Científicos. Dismissing out of hand the possibility of any future insurrection based on abstract principles, he nevertheless admitted that pressure of hunger might well drive Mexico into revolution. He then added:

> I do not here refer to the hunger of the mass of the people, who if they cannot eat drink, and when they can no longer get drunk, die without noise or epitaph, as happens regularly after any major harvest failure. I refer to the terrible hunger of the middle classes, when industry enters a crisis and the public treasury is bankrupt.[20]

In his view the same class of lawyers, clerks, journalists, army officers and bureaucrats who had contributed so much to the political distemper of the years after Independence would be the likeliest source of dissension in the twentieth century. His study of Mexican history offered him little reason to anticipate any danger of popular upheaval.

The initial course of the Revolution closely followed Bulnes' prediction. If the national treasury was not bankrupt, the shift to the gold standard in 1905, when taken with the American business crisis of

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

1908, had thrust the economy into depression. Manufacturing production was stagnant. Export prices fell. Several mines suspended operation. The mounting debts of landowners endangered the stability of the banking system. Real wages for workers in all branches of the economy fell precipitately. It was this general depression which prompted a wave of strikes in 1906–07, followed by rural uprisings and anarchist agitation.[21] Among the middle classes discontent mounted against the continued dominance of the Científicos, who were denounced as a narrow clique subservient to foreign financial interests.

It is important to note, however, that urban opposition to the further re-election of Porfirio Díaz turned to General Bernardo Reyes, Governor of New León and military commander of the North-East army brigade, who had presided over the rapid industrialisation of Monterrey. Reyes was thought to be a nationalist and hence by implication hostile to foreign control of the export economy. He had gained widespread popularity from sponsoring social legislation designed to protect factory workers in New León.[22] Political clubs were formed in most cities to support his campaign for the presidency which recruited members among artisans and industrial workers as well as the urban middle class. A contemporary journalist, Luis Cabrera, who later entered Carranza's cabinet, claimed that Reyes was backed 'by professional men and students, by the industrial working class'.[23] In short, renovation of the political system combined with progressive social policies, rather than any desire for revolutionary change, was the great object. To achieve this aim men supported a candidate cast in much the same military authoritarian mould as the old dictator.

In the event, Reyes refused to mount an open challenge to Díaz, who after despatching his rival abroad secured re-election for the eighth time. By 1910, Díaz was aged 79 and his regime had entered its dotage. Among eight cabinet members, two men were over eighty and another three past sixty. The young contender, José Yves Limantour, although only 57, had served as Treasury Secretary since 1893. Much the same pattern prevailed in the states, where of twenty governors, seventeen were over sixty and of these men eight were past seventy. Congress and the judiciary exhibited the same gerontocratic paralysis. More important for any analysis of the revolution, the federal army suffered from similar defects, with generals of eighty, colonels of seventy and captains of sixty.[24] After thirty years in office the Porfirian regime still depended on the person of Díaz and his extended

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

clientele of friends and servants: political power had yet to be fully institutionalised and there was no mechanism available to ensure a peaceful transfer of power.

With Reyes in exile and Limantour discredited and tired, it fell to Francisco Madero, a wealthy landowner from Coahuila, to organise opposition to Díaz. Defeated through electoral fraud in 1910, Madero promptly crossed the American border to head an armed insurrection. The resort to violence proved a decisive step for the future course of events. For if his electoral campaign had drawn its support from the towns, often from former Reyista clubs, Madero's military campaign achieved its success from the backing of armed bands recruited in the countryside. It was in the winter months of 1910–11 that Pancho Villa, Pascual Orozco and Emiliano Zapata all appeared on the national scene.[25] True, once Díaz resigned, Madero hastened to accept a peace treaty which enabled him to assume the Presidency through general election rather than by force of arms. His slogan of 'a free vote and no re-election' brought him widespread popularity since it offered hope of political renewal and local freedom. Nevertheless, his personal prestige was not reflected at the level of Congress or of the states. If in some regions men who had mobilised troops against Díaz now obtained municipal or state office – a pattern exemplified in Sonora – elsewhere, especially in the Central zone, conservative and even Catholic candidates gained impressive majorities.[26]

With the advantage of hindsight, it is clear that Madero's eagerness to accept a constitutional settlement expressed his abhorrence of genuine revolution. His refusal to enforce any extensive purge of the federal bureaucracy or army alienated his followers without winning him the confidence of the Porfirian establishment. His government was challenged by a series of revolts, none of which were crushed with the severity necessary to deter future conspiracy. In consequence, as the authority of the Presidency waned, effective power steadily drained towards the states and the localities where the troops raised to combat Díaz still retained their arms. Madero's failure to understand the nature of the forces he had unleashed eventually led to the disintegration of the Mexican state. As James Harrington wrote of England prior to the Civil War: '*the dissolution of this government caused the war, not the war the dissolution of this government*'.[27]

If the dissipation of presidential authority created the circumstances of a political crisis, Madero's assassination by General Victor-

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

iano Huerta lit the fuse of revolution. For political renewal now entailed the destruction of the federal army and the complete displacement of the Porfirian bureaucracy. The frontier states of Sonora and Coahuila refused to acknowledge Huerta as President and instead recognised Venustiano Carranza, the governor of Coahuila, as First Chief of the Constitutionalist armies. In both cases the core of their brigades was the state militia financed by local taxes, expropriations of enemy property, especially haciendas, and the federal customs situated at the American border.[28] At the outset, therefore, the Mexican Revolution was a war of succession fought between the federal army and the northern states. But to conquer Huerta and the Porfirian establishment which supported him, the Constitutionalists had to forge an alliance with a heterogeneous coalition of rural caudillos, peasant leaders and former bandits. Only after the fall of Mexico City was Alvaro Obregón, commander of the Sonoran army, able to obtain urban support in the shape of the red battalions recruited among the artisans and craftsmen of the Capital.[29]

With the defeat of Huerta the Mexican state dissolved and political power was seized by armed bands and their caudillos. It was the destruction of all central authority which allowed popular leaders to dominate the course of national politics. For the first time in its history Mexico City was occupied and controlled by rural caudillos without education or political experience. Small wonder that in these circumstances the Constitutionalist leaders sought to recruit peasant support or acquiescence with the promise of land reform. Moreover, even when the northern coalition headed by Carranza and Obregón finally succeeded in crushing Villa, the authority of the new executive was sharply limited by the military power of local caudillos and revolutionary generals. The task of re-creating a national state, comparable in prestige and authority to the Porfirian regime, was to absorb all the political energy and talent of the Presidents who governed Mexico until 1940. To assist them, of course, they could count on the towns and on the urban middle class. For if the disintegration of the state had allowed the countryside, not to say the wilderness, to invade the city, the moment a national executive was established, backed by a sufficiency of military power and the fiscal resources of the federal system, then the great mass of political and economic energy inherent in the towns swung the balance decisively in favour of the central government based on Mexico City. Years before, in his polemic with Sarmiento, J. B. Alberdi had insisted that the true source of caudillo power in Argentina was not terror or

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

military violence, but rather was located in the economic might of Buenos Aires.[30] So, too, in Mexico, it was the towns and the Capital which always had provided the basis of the national state. The challenge from the countryside, no matter how threatening, was always transient and in the nature of things doomed to failure. As Fray Servando Teresa de Mier told Congress in his famous political prophecy: 'nature herself, so to say, has centralised us'.[31] Nevertheless, if both history and geography, not to mention the industrial future, rendered the creation of a strong central state inevitable, the nature and form of the political regime which came to sustain it derived from the exigencies set in motion by the Revolution.

II

But what of the agrarian revolution? Surely it was the crisis in the countryside which drove the Mexican peasantry into revolt? The growing concentration of landed property under the sway of the great estate, the merciless exploitation of agricultural labourers and the steady decline in popular living standards: here were reasons enough for a revolution. Certainly there is a populist tradition of American commentary on Mexico which adopts such a position. At its head stands J. K. Turner's *Barbarous Mexico* (1911) which stridently condemned the war of extermination waged against the Yaqui Indians in Sonora and enserfment of the Mayas on the henequen plantations of Yucatán. Closely associated with the Mexican Liberal Party, the anarchist movement led by the Flores Magón brothers, Turner roundly denounced the Porfirian regime both for its alliance with American capital and for its complicity in the exploitation of the rural masses.[32] Much the same line was followed by John Reed, already a supporter of the Industrial Workers of the World, the American anarcho-syndicalist union, who, in his *Insurgent Mexico* (1914), painted a vivid contrast between the dynamic popular figure of Pancho Villa and the corrupt clique that surrounded the ageing Venustiano Carranza. He hailed the former Chihuahuan bandit as 'the Friend of the Poor. The Mexican Robin Hood'.[33] It was in much the same vein that Carleton Beals was later to describe Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the governor of Yucatán in the 1920s, as 'the Gandhi of the Mayas'. Influenced by the potent images of Diego Rivera, who illustrated his *Mexican Maze* (1931) Beals asserted that 'the Indian is the real, the basic Mexican'.[34]

By far the most influential figure in this populist tradition was

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10209-4 - Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution
Edited by D. A. Brading
Excerpt
More information

Frank Tannenbaum, in his youth a member of the IWW, who, as professor at Columbia University, wrote several books on Mexico, ranging from a painstaking analysis of the land question to an overall interpretation of recent Mexican history. Writing in 1933 he explicitly contrasted the revolution in Mexico to its Bolshevik counterpart: 'The Mexican Revolution was anonymous. It was essentially the work of the common people. No organised party presided over its birth. No great intellectuals prescribed its programme, formulated its doctrine, outlined its objectives . . . There is no Lenin in Mexico . . . *Small groups of Indians under anonymous leaders were the Revolution.*'[35] In essence this was a struggle over land fought between the great estate and the Indian village. But it also expressed the profound opposition of conservative towns and a radical countryside, an opposition which in turn reflected the historical antagonism of the heirs of the Spanish conquerors and the Indian peasantry. Needless to say, this interpretation led Tannenbaum to accept Zapata as the most representative figure of the agrarian revolution, describing him as: 'a simple, vigorous human being who knew little of the sophisticated and faraway world on the other side of the hills, but who knew that his people had been robbed of their land, and that it was his call to return these lands to them'.[36]

To explain the popular attack on the great estate, it sufficed to denounce the excesses of their owners. But of course abuse often admits of remedy. Reasons therefore had to be found to justify the outright destruction of the hacienda. On this score, Tannenbaum and other American scholars, such as G. M. McBride and Eyler Simpson, found inspiration in the work of two Mexican jurists, Wistano Luis Orozco and Andrés Molina Enríquez. The answer proved remarkably simple: the Mexican hacienda was a feudal institution, dependent on debt peonage for its labour, and characterised by an intermittent and exiguous intervention in the market economy. As early as 1895 Orozco had published an extensive critique of recent legislation dealing with the survey and sale of public lands. A liberal himself, Orozco sharply condemned the Lerdo Law of 1857 and the subsequent decrees of Juárez which had effectively undermined the legal security of Indian land tenure. Equally important, he attacked the hacienda both for its monopoly of land and for the despotic power exercised by owners over their peons. Taking as an example two districts in Zacatecas, he contrasted the thriving town of Jerez surrounded by at least two thousand small properties with the desolate condition of Villanueva where the entire area was domin-