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Jan Bazant
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Introduction

[The conquest] was neither a victory nor a defeat; it was the painful birth of the Mexican nation, the Mexico of today.

Inscription placed in 1964 on Tlatelolco Square, Mexico City

In 1519 the Spanish captain Hernán Cortés landed with five-hundred men on the Mexican coast, in front of the snow-capped cone of the Star Mountain, Citlaltépetl, on the very spot where the port of Veracruz now stands. Two years later, the Spaniards seized the capital of the Aztec empire, Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City. Before the middle of the century, the Spaniards were masters of central and southeastern Mexico and were beginning to expand to the arid North. The viceroyalty of New Spain was set up in the conquered country in 1535.

With the exception of the coasts and the peninsulas of Yucatán and lower California, Mexico then, as now, comprised a series of plateaus, some fertile, others which had been salt lakes, sterile—plateaus surrounded in most cases by mountains, or, as in the vicinity of Guadalajara, dropping off to the sea as if cut by sharp knives. They become gradually higher towards the south. About half of the country lies within the tropics, but the mountains produce a temperate climate. There is no lack of sunshine in the Mexican territory; water is the critical element. The prevailing winds come from the humid Gulf of Mexico, but the eastern escarpment which rises behind the coast and runs parallel to it forms an effective rain barrier part of the year.

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Thus, geographically Mexico consists of three distinct areas – the Southeast, the Center and the North. The first corresponds roughly to the ancient land of Olmecs, believed to be the first civilized nation in Mexico, and of Mayas; most of it is lowland with abundant rainfall for more than six months a year. The Center is separated from the Southeast by the eastern escarpment; its common feature is a rainy season lasting four to six months, from June to September or November, according to the year. Its valleys range from 1,500 to 2,600 meters above sea level and the climate is warm to cool, which explains why the Center has been the heart of the country since before the conquest. It is neither too hot nor too cold; neither too humid nor too dry. Central Mexico was first the home of the Teotihuacán culture and then of the Nahuatl-speaking, warlike Toltecs and Aztecs, and it was here that a high civilization was flourishing when the Spaniards arrived; the Mayan civilization in the Southeast had already declined The district of Oaxaca, an isolated pocket southeast of the Valley of Mexico, had been the seat of one of the most advanced civilizations, of which the ruins of Monte Albán give witness.

Maize, beans, and squash, often grown simultaneously on the same field, were staple crops in most of Mexico. Maize was ideally suited for the Mexican rainy season with its irregular showers, its weeds and pests. The Spaniards found out soon after the conquest that European cereals, especially wheat, could not be cultivated during the rains so they began to grow wheat during the dry season with the help of irrigation. Many varieties of maize flourished, from the lowland tropical maize which ripened in three months to the high-altitude variety that required more than half a year to mature. The large agave, source of the alcoholic beverage *pulque,* was grown between 1,800 and 3,000 meters above sea level in Central Mexico.

Maize cultivation was restriced to Southeastern, Western, and Central Mexico. Approximately north of the east-west

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line, Querétaro — the Lerma River — Guadalajara, rainfall begins to be too irregular or insufficient, or both, for maize. The characteristic plant of the country north of this line was cactus, many varieties of it. This northern desert was the home of the hunting and food-gathering Chichimecs. It fell to the Spaniards to extend sedentary civilization into the enormous arid North.

Everywhere they went, the Spaniards — soldiers, priests, miners and farmers — spread the Catholic faith and the Spanish language and culture. As few Spanish women chose to emigrate, the natural result were unions of Spaniards and Indian women, out of which Spanish-Indians or *mestizos* were born. Another consequence of the conquest was that most land fell to the Spaniards who began to transform it with Indian labor into farms and cattle ranches. Colonial society emerged slowly. It can be said that it took its shape about one hundred years after the seizure of Tenochtitlan.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the central, viceregal government as well as the high ecclesiastical positions and foreign trade were in the hands of European-born, so-called "peninsular Spaniards." Mexican-born Spaniards called creoles, many of whom had Indian blood in their veins but were registered as Spaniards, were miners, merchants and hacendados, owners of large farms or estates called "haciendas." "Mestizos" were mostly workers and artisans, and there were a comparatively small number of black slaves and mulattoes. Indians, exempted from taxes as well as tithes in exchange for a yearly head-tax called tribute, lived either in their villages under the protection and supervision of special authorities, or as peons, laborers, on haciendas or in towns.

Both peninsular and Mexican-born Spaniards considered themselves gentlemen. Many of them were wealthy. A few of the wealthiest acquired titles of nobility from the crown. Some creoles or Mexican-born Spaniards had been to schools of higher learning but nevertheless they had to be satisfied with minor government positions, although they were often

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more cultured than their Spanish-born cousins who ruled the country. They resented it and quite naturally began to abhor the conquest and extol the Indian resistance. Their feelings were waiting for an opportunity to express themselves.

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I

Birth of Mexican Independence 1805–1821

Every colony that is well treated honours its parent state, but becomes estranged from it by injustice. For colonists are not sent forth on the understanding that they are to be slaves of those who remain behind, but that they are to be their equals.

Thucydides, "Causes of the War,"
The History of the Peloponnesian War

Revolutions are often promoted by segments of the upper class, who see their interests endangered by political or economic events and as a result become critical of the conditions. In this chapter I will show how this happened in New Spain, how this discontent reached and then passed the point of no return, and what its ultimate consequences were.

When war broke out between Great Britain and Spain on 12 December 1804, the Madrid government was subjected to a severe financial strain. Under these circumstances, it decreed two weeks later the compulsory redemption of mortgages belonging to chantries and pious works in Spanish America and the Philippines, as well as the sale of their real estate; the proceeds would go to the royal treasury in Madrid to redeem or "consolidate" the government paper money, circulating in Spain. It had been customary in New Spain for wealthy people to institute in their wills a chantry, by mortgaging their property for a certain amount at 5 percent. This interest would support a chaplain who had the duty in return to say a certain number of masses each year for the soul of

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the benefactor. Similarly pious works were sums willed by their donors to form a charitable foundation. Another common cause of indebtedness was the endowment of daughters and sisters entering a nunnery, which was usually effected by mortgaging the property in perpetuity for a specified amount of interest that would be paid to the nunnery.

In theory, the redemption, or *consolidación* as the measure came to be known, was a forced loan: the metropolitan government would borrow funds estimated at the enormous sum of over 40 million pesos from the endowments. But these did not have the money, which thus had to be collected from the debtors; as these did not have it either, and as the government would be satisfied only with cash, the debtors' property would have to be sold in public auction. In reality, the redemption, disguised as a harmless loan, threatened to become a wholesale expropriation of Mexican landowners. A storm of protest arose all over the hitherto peaceful country; farmers (hacendados), merchants, miners, and town councils sent petitions to the authorities asking them not to carry out the decree and warning them of the consequences.

The compulsory redemption began to be carried out in New Spain on 6 September 1805. The authorities accepted part payments of larger sums. But many people were simply unable to raise enough funds; in 1807 and 1808, the journals of the capital were full of notices concerning public auctions of houses, large and small farms, cattle, and businesses of all sorts. But in general, the largest debtors, who happened to be at the same time the richest landowners, did not suffer so much; a dozen case studies reveal that their estates did not have to be auctioned. If the richer landowners were unable or unwilling to pay, the authorities threatened to sell one of their haciendas, and after considerable haggling, a new agreement was reached ... and so it continued until the latter part of 1808. All in all, Spain succeeded in extracting from her colony around 12 million pesos, approximately one fourth of the total debt to chantries and pious works. It was sufficient to estrange the landowning elite from the mother country.[1]

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Religious motives were also present. Spain was at the time a satellite of France and it was widely believed that the large sums were not used for war against Great Britain, but were transferred to Paris. Whatever the truth, this belief influenced public opinion in Mexico and strengthened local opposition to the extraction of money. In the mind of the Mexican landowner, France was the symbol, the incarnation, of hateful atheism. As a consequence of various reforms of the Spanish Bourbons, the power, influence, and wealth of the church in the colonies had been considerably reduced. Many Spaniards brought to their new home a more liberal spirit. But Mexican hacendados, especially those resident in provincial towns, retained their conservative turn of mind; some of them remembered the brutal expulsion by the Spanish government of the Jesuits.

The already docile church in New Spain hardly protested against the redemption although this affected the security of its investments; the funds would no longer be guaranteed by real estate but only by the insolvent Spanish government. The church hierarchy—the bishops and cathedral chapters—lived from tithes and therefore were not affected by the redemption. Curates of wealthy parishes lived mainly from parochial dues; while poorer parish priests and clerics with no fixed benefice, who represented the majority of Mexican secular clergy, depended partly or completely on the income from chantries. This applied also to many friars.[2] As Spain was soon unable to pay the interest, the lower clergy were drastically impoverished. Their interests converged with those of landowners, and when the time was ripe, the lower clergy readily supplied the hacendados with an ideology.

They did not have to wait long. In June 1808, news arrived in Mexico of revolutionary changes in Spain: the fall of the royal favorite, Godoy, and of Charles IV, the succession of Ferdinand VII, the popular uprising in Madrid against the French occupation army, and finally the arrest of Ferdinand VII by Napoleon, who forced his abdication. Spain was submerged in a civil war and, at the same time, was fighting a

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war of national liberation against foreign invasion. Viceregal authority in Mexico rested on that of the crown in Spain. But now the king fell into captivity and nobody in the colony thought of recognizing the usurper. Sovereignty had returned to the people. *Juntas* were springing up in Spain in the name of Ferdinand VII,[3] and in Mexico City the town council moved toward independence under the direction of two creole lawyers Primo de Verdad and Francisco Azcárate. The friar Melchor de Talamantes provided the program, which demanded the end of the redemption, indemnity for damages and restitution of conditions to their original state. He obviously spoke for the landholders and lower clergy.

It seemed logical to expect that the viceroy would uphold the authority of Spain. By one of the curious inversions of history the opposite occurred. The viceroy, Iturrigaray, despaired of the Spanish cause in the colony over which he presided, since Spain was unable to lend him military support. Perhaps he was influenced by his contacts with the silver miners of the country, for it was later revealed that his distribution of imported mercury for the amalgamation of silver ore had not been a disinterested endeavor and that in the few years of his government he had amassed an enormous fortune, not in real estate to be sure, but in coin, precious metals, and gems.

Now the Creole party representing Mexican-born Spaniards offered to appoint him captain general of the colony. The royal officials were to be confirmed in their posts, but all civil and ecclesiastical vacancies were to be filled by creoles. The creoles, who owned haciendas but were not interested in managing them, who had acquired culture and education but were deprived of the opportunity to exercise their knowledge except on the small scale of town councils, would finally achieve political power. The Bourbon reforms had helped to create an affluent group that later turned to the professions and finally to politics; if at first they benefited Spain, in the long run they undermined the regime.

The creole lawyers of Mexico City envisaged a peaceful

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revolution. But this was not to be. One of the viceroy's first decisions was to suspend the forced redemption, which he did on 9 August with the purpose of quieting the influential elements of the country. But it was too late. Larger issues were looming now on the horizon. Peninsular traders of the capital sensed danger to their monopolistic position. A cleavage of interests became apparent between the Spanish-born importers of goods from Spain or via Spain and creole landowners who, as consumers, wanted cheaper goods imported directly from England or other countries; this could have been achieved only by making Mexico independent. Thus the peninsular Spaniards were pushed into allegiance for their mother country, even though many were married to daughters of Mexican landowners. They decided to act and under the leadership of the Basque merchant Yermo organized a conspiracy to depose the viceroy. The coup was successful thanks to perfect planning and execution by a volunteer force composed of 300 employees of Spanish shops. These were usually poor immigrants working day and night as salesmen and servants for their employers, sometimes their relatives, with the hope of eventually becoming partners or sons-in-law or of saving enough money to establish businesses of their own. Their morals were strict but their more visible manners were brusque and coarse; their voices were loud and they were uneducated. These people, standing behind the counters in shops, were in daily contact with the Mexicans, and it is not surprising that they were a target of jokes and popular hatred. These men had everything to lose in case of Mexican independence, certainly more than their employers who already had their property and their creole connections. They proved reliable; on the misty night of 15 September 1808, these storm troops, led by Yermo, assaulted the viceregal palace and imprisoned the viceroy and the creoles known as leaders of the movement for independence. A new viceroy was promptly appointed.

This act pushed New Spain on the path of a violent revolution. For centuries, the principle of legitimate succession

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had been rigorously observed. Now the spell was broken. If the Spaniards broke the existing law and order, reflected the creoles, it was now their duty to restore it. If a handful of Europeans succeeded, why not the Americans, as the creoles began to call themselves with a pride behind which was barely hidden a resentment at being deprived access to the highest posts in their own country? After 1808 it was easier to organize conspiracies in the provinces because the capital city was under strict control of Spanish forces. Spanish power was also strong east of Mexico, in Puebla and Veracruz; since the conquest this had been the route along which European immigrants settled before spreading from the capital all over the country. The immigrants were numerous there and they were thus able to help to keep this life-line open. On the other hand, there were fewer European-born Spaniards in other provinces, especially in the Bajío.

The Bajío was a broad fertile valley stretching roughly from Querétaro in the east almost as far as Lake Chapala in the west and from the town of León and the village of Dolores in the north to Lake Cuitzeo in the south, near the important city of Valladolid, today Morelia. Until present times the climate of the Bajío has been rather arid and it had little sedentary population at the time of the conquest. The Spaniards introduced a new type of agriculture there: maize would be grown during the rainy season, occasionally with the help of irrigation, and wheat during the dry season, always with the waters of the Lerma River and its tributaries as irrigation. Indian laborers were brought in or migrated from the South.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Bajío was the most prosperous part of the country. It contained the richest silver mining community, Guanajuato; woolen cloths were produced in Querétaro and San Miguel el Grande (later renamed San Miguel Allende), and leather goods were made in León. It had the highest population density of all New Spain. Compared to other regions, it had many towns, mainly commercial centers for the surrounding farms and with large

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