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978-0-521-44121-6 - The Central Republic in Mexico, 1835-1846: Hombres de Bien in The Age of Santa Anna

Michael P. Costeloe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1

An introduction: change and continuity in the  
Age of Santa Anna

Over the past forty years, impressive progress has been made in our knowledge of the history of Mexico; historians on both sides of the Atlantic have written many important books and articles which have cast new light on the way the country has developed. Looking at the broad sweep of Mexican historiography from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, it is evident that the colonial era and the 1910 Revolution and its aftermath have found most favour. Since the seminal work of Tannenbaum and his generation, the Revolution in particular has been subjected to intense scrutiny. There have been many studies of major and minor personalities and dozens of well-researched investigations into political, social, economic and cultural aspects. Almost a whole generation's work culminated in 1986 with the publication of Knight's monumental two-volume work, more than one thousand pages long, which brought together and analysed, supported or rejected, the myriad interpretations of one of the major events of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

The colonial period has been equally well, if not even better, served. Borah, Gibson, Hanke and others in the United States, Zavala and Miranda in Mexico, Chevalier and Ricard in France, to name only a few, examined early colonial institutions, society and religious life with unprecedented skill and attention. With archival research in national and state depositories becoming increasingly possible as Mexicans themselves realized the value of safeguarding their historical patrimony, younger scholars moved to the eighteenth century, where the efforts of Brading, Hamnett, Lavrin, Florescano and many others have given us a much broader and deeper appreciation of the Bourbon age.

There remains, however, one substantial gap in the historiography. The nineteenth century – above all, the three decades between independence in 1821 and the midcentury Reform, has attracted comparatively little scholarly interest. The so-called Age of Santa Anna remains, to use Van Young's words in a recent article, 'one of the great unexplored

1 A. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge, 1986).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

territories of Mexican history' and compared with the colonial and modern eras, concerning which there is a voluminous and ever-expanding literature, it is almost virgin territory for the historian.<sup>2</sup> This neglect, of course, is not total, and in the past few years monographs have appeared on Church-State relations, fiscal policy, industry and trade and diverse other aspects, as have a number of accounts of prominent family dynasties. The emphasis has been, and continues to be, on economic topics, with the political sphere and the lives of those who participated in it comparatively untouched. Few of the many men who rose to dominate the young republic have been deemed worthy of serious biographical study, and there remains no satisfactory explanation of why the country, after three centuries of relative stability under Spanish rule, descended so rapidly into political turmoil. Mexicans at the time had no doubts as to the cause of their problems. For them, it was their inability to find a stable constitutional basis for self-government, to create political structures which would ensure both individual and institutional rights and liberties. They were firmly convinced that social and economic progress could and would be achieved only when a permanent political framework had been devised. They failed in their aims and priorities, and as a result, Mexico was to suffer almost fifty years of political ferment and economic difficulty until the iron hand of Porfirio Díaz was able to impose order in the name of economic progress.

A main feature of the Age of Santa Anna, therefore, was chronic political upheaval and Mexicans' apparent incapacity to establish a stable and enduring system of self-government. As both cause and effect of the turmoil, no president save the first managed to retain office for his full elected or appointed term, and governments changed with bewildering frequency. An incalculable number of revolts, or *pronunciamientos*, took place, and military action by ambitious army officers became the normal method of expressing dissent or pursuing policy change. The constitutional basis of the nation fluctuated: monarchy, federal and central republicanism, dictatorship and variants of all four systems were tried from time to time. Political parties came and went to re-emerge under different guises as the ideologies of liberalism and conservatism fragmented into dozens of divergent sects. From 1824 to 1857, there were sixteen presidents and thirty-three provisional national leaders, for a total of forty-nine administrations. The Ministry of War changed hands fifty-three times, that of Foreign Affairs fifty-seven times, Interior sixty-one times and Treasury no less than eighty-seven times.<sup>3</sup> In the provincial and

2 E. Van Young, 'Recent Anglophone Scholarship on Mexico and Central America in the Age of Revolution (1750-1850)', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 65 (1985), 725-43.

3 Statistics from D. F. Stevens, 'Instability in Mexico from Independence to the War of the Reform', Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1984, p. 182.

Cambridge University Press

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Michael P. Costeloe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*An introduction*

3

municipal bureaucracies, there was an unending stream of momentarily favoured or disgraced officials in and out. Representative congresses of various types were elected or appointed more or less every two years, but often only to have their deliberations abruptly halted by the rise of a general-president who saw no need for a legislative assembly.

The list of such tangible symptoms of political instability and of the economic difficulties which accompanied them is almost endless, and their origins lie in many respects in the pressures released and problems that arose when Mexico won the ten-year-long war of independence. One feature of recent Mexican historiography is that the traditional periodization of history into colonial–independence–modern is no longer considered convenient or apt. Recent works on institutions, economy and society have begun to advocate the continuity of history and to argue that although the separation from Spain was undeniably a traumatic and disruptive event, it could not and did not represent a sudden break in every respect with the past.<sup>4</sup> The generation which survived the war faced economic difficulties, as well as social, cultural and to some extent ideological issues which had been germinating long before Hidalgo's *Grito de Dolores* in 1810. Hence, to explain many aspects of the instability of the post-independence years, we must look to the tensions of late colonial times and seek connections with the early republican era.

It is not my intention to enter into this debate except to say that it seems to me that the concept of continuity has considerable validity. In many respects, it may even be said to be self-evident inasmuch as the personal problems, social values and opinions of merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, landowners, peasants and all the other groups and individuals which made up Mexico's population obviously did not disappear overnight. Also, to quote Van Young again, 'Modes and social relations of production, family and gender relationships, certain characteristics of state structure and action, and so on, appear to have been substantially in place by the middle of the eighteenth century and to have altered more between 1700 and 1750, or between 1850 and 1900, than between 1750 and 1850'.<sup>5</sup> But, and it does seem to me a serious qualification of the current continuity thesis, it would also be wrong to underestimate or diminish the effects of independence. Change certainly did follow in many spheres when the political, institutional, judicial, social and economic structures

4 For example, see L. Arnold, *Bureaucracy and Bureaucrats in Mexico City, 1742–1835* (Tucson, Ariz., 1988); B. Hamnett, *Roots of Insurgency: Mexican Regions, 1750–1824* (Cambridge, 1986); G. P. C. Thomson, *Puebla de los Angeles: Industry and Society in a Mexican City, 1700–1850* (Boulder, Colo., 1989); L. B. Hall, 'Independence and Revolution: Continuities and Discontinuities', in J. E. Rodríguez O, ed., *The Independence of Mexico and the Creation of the New Nation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), pp. 323–9.

5 Van Young, 'Recent Anglophone Scholarship', pp. 728–9.

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Michael P. Costeloe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the colonial era began to break down as a result of both emancipation and changes on the broader international scene. When Agustín de Iturbide and his supporters entered the gates of the city of Mexico on 27 September 1821, they indeed faced a new world with new problems, pressures and unforeseen difficulties. It is with these new problems and pressures that I am mostly concerned in this introduction. Added to those inherited from the past, they were to be the cause of much of the turmoil which persuaded many Mexicans that their nation required a centralized form of government. In accordance with their conservative but, they thought, progressive attitudes, they hoped to preserve those values and practices they esteemed from their past and to reconcile them with the new circumstances and changing ideas of their own time.

Some of the problems were certainly predictable. The war had caused immense damage to the economy with the widespread destruction of property, commerce and industry, notably mining, and, most important of all, the flight of capital. The lack of capital, especially the shortage of silver coin, was not a new phenomenon – large amounts of specie had gone to Spain in the final decades of the viceroyalty – but the situation was seriously exacerbated during the war when vast quantities left the country. Economic recovery, if it did take place (and that is also a matter of current debate among economic historians), was definitely patchy and slow, and with one or two notable exceptions, such as the growth of the textile industry, from the 1830s onwards there was little tangible evidence of it as far as contemporaries were concerned. No government was able to generate sufficient revenues with which to meet its obligations internationally, a situation that led to war with France and many years of dispute with the United States. Internally, the fiscal situation hovered on the edge of national bankruptcy, and governments resorted to desperate measures to make even token payments to state employees, including the military, pensioners, widows and many others dependent on the public purse. A vicious circle of mortgaging present and future income to secure loans from speculators at ever-higher rates of interest reduced the net revenues available for daily needs, and a futile attempt to increase the amount of currency in circulation by issuing copper coin led to increased poverty and hunger as the new money rapidly lost much of its face value.<sup>6</sup> After defaulting on foreign loans obtained in the early 1820s closed the possibility of any large-scale international capital investment, there seemed no solution to the fiscal crisis. Governments responded with ad hoc measures of forced loans, confiscation and sale of assets, including

6 M. Gayón Córdoba, 'Guerra, dictadura y cobre: Crónica de una ciudad asediada (agosto-diciembre 1841)', *Historias*, 5 (1984), 53-65.

Cambridge University Press

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Michael P. Costeloe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*An introduction*

5

those of the Church, and increased taxation of every kind and at every level.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the financial crisis, and the general political instability accompanying it, was attributable to the demands of one institution, which, although it absorbed a major proportion of the revenues, at the same time was never provided with enough to meet its claimed needs. The Mexican army assumed control in 1821 and was to dominate the executive branch of government for the next 125 years. A military caste, at the officer level, with its own traditions and conceptions of the role and status of an army, had existed under Bourbon rule, but the institution which emerged in 1821 was essentially new in Mexican society.<sup>8</sup> The officer corps, with its love of parades and colourful uniforms, consisted almost entirely of men who had made their reputations and acquired their ranks while fighting on either side during the war. Led by Iturbide, they reached a consensus to separate from Spain, and they became immensely popular as a result. Because of their decision, and in some cases heroic careers in the insurgency, they were the natural and popular leaders of the new country, and they were given the esteem and privileged status which they, and it must be said the public at large, thought they deserved. It was from their ranks that every president, with a couple of interim exceptions, before Benito Juárez was to be drawn, and despite the subsequent rise of powerful civilian politicians and political parties that opposed the pre-eminence of a military caste, they successfully defended their status and their privileges.<sup>9</sup>

They were able to do so for a number of reasons. Most important was the fact that the emancipation achieved by Iturbide was believed to be both insecure and vulnerable. For the next thirty years, if not longer, many Mexicans thought that the recolonization of their country was always possible, if not probable, and events were to bear out their fears when Napoleon III imposed Maximilian as their emperor. The more immediate threat, to persist until 1833, came from Spain and Ferdinand VII, who, it was well known, had vowed never to sacrifice his claims to his former colony. Throughout the 1820s, and in the full knowledge of the Mexican

7 For the best analysis of the fiscal crisis, see B. Tenenbaum, *The Politics of Penury: Debts and Taxes in Mexico, 1821-1856* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1986). On the more general economic problems, see J. H. Coatsworth, 'Obstacles to Economic Growth in Nineteenth Century Mexico,' *American Historical Review*, 83 (1978), 80-100. On the foreign loans, see J. Bazant, *Historia de la deuda exterior de México (1823-1946)* (Mexico, 1968).

8 C. Archer, *The Army in Bourbon Mexico* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1977). There is no satisfactory history of the Mexican army after independence.

9 Between 1821 and 1851, fifteen generals occupied the presidential office, some on an interim basis and some, notably Santa Anna, on several occasions. During the same period, six civilians were acting or interim president but three of these for only a few days. For the full list, see F. N. Samponaro, 'The Political Role of the Army in Mexico, 1821-1848,' Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, 1974, pp. 394-6.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

government, he plotted and planned reconquest, seeking aid in the courts of Europe and concocting all manner of schemes to fund an invasion force. His efforts culminated in 1829 with an attack on Mexico by an army dispatched from Cuba. Even after the humiliating defeat of that force, Ferdinand continued to believe that reconquest was possible and even wanted by most Mexicans.<sup>10</sup>

The death of Ferdinand in 1833 removed the Spanish threat, but several years before another potential source of foreign aggression had become clear. From 1825, with the arrival of the first U.S. ambassador, Joel R. Poinsett, the desire of the United States for territorial expansion was obvious, particularly with regard to Texas. Relations between the two countries quickly deteriorated, and with almost constant friction on the northern border, soon compounded by disputes in California, open conflict became probable rather than possible. After the Texas war of 1836 and the Mexican defeat, the United States was viewed as a permanent threat to the future territorial integrity of the republic, and every government proclaimed its intention to resist militarily any further aggression as well as to reconquer Texas.

Mexicans feared the United States as the greatest potential foreign aggressor, but they also had strong suspicions of British and French intentions, notably when France invaded and occupied the port of Veracruz in 1838 on the pretext of collecting debts owed to French citizens. The insecurity they felt was the main factor in their sustaining, at least in theory, a large standing army and in ensuring that the military retained its status, privileges and popular acclaim. The generals themselves were very conscious of the value of emphasizing their own importance, and they saw to it that military victories and heroes of the war of independence were celebrated with public holidays and other forms of recognition. Santa Anna, above all, was a master of the personality cult and of glorifying the virtues and indispensability of the military, and he constantly reminded the public of his own successes on the battlefield, few and far between though they actually were.

The army and the associated cult of the military caste were, therefore, one new feature of the years after independence, and yet the extent of the army's public esteem was hardly justified by its condition or achievements. The senior officer level, which so carefully and successfully cultivated its own prestige, does seem to have had a certain esprit de corps and sense of duty, even if that did include the right and obligation to intervene in political affairs and act as the ultimate arbiter of the national good. But the regular army as a whole was a shambles and in no sense a coherent,

<sup>10</sup> See my *Response to Revolution: Imperial Spain and the Spanish American Revolutions, 1810-1840* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 96-100.



*An introduction*

7

disciplined body. An impressive array of legislation to create a well-regulated military force was certainly enacted. There were ordinances, an administrative framework, command structure and all manner of directives flowing from the Ministry of War, but it was the unofficial, irregular practices which became the norm. Promotions, for example, came to depend not on rank, service or deeds but on the patronage of individual officers, and the quickest route to the much sought after general's insignia was soon known to be via the *pronunciamiento*, or at least by declaring support for the winning side. As one contemporary put it, 'The rebellions are speculations in which one risks nothing and can gain a lot.'<sup>11</sup>

The lower ranks were notoriously ill-equipped, housed and trained, and given the methods of recruitment, their condition was not surprising. Although national conscription of all adult males was decreed from time to time in moments of crisis, real or assumed, the usual methods of finding men to fill the numerous infantry regiments were forced levy or lottery together with regular round-ups of vagrants. If the victims failed to escape the chains which bound them together as they were marched to the barracks, their destitute women and children had little option but to follow them.<sup>12</sup> Desertion became the common means of escape, and when the deserters were unable to disappear into the rural communities from which they were often taken, they joined the hordes of bandits and thieves who infested the highways and urban centres. Desertion was so rife that the official statistics of the size of the army are meaningless, and it was a rare occasion when more than a few thousand men could be said to be under arms. But it was in the interests of the officer corps to inflate the number of those needed to defend the nation in order to justify the ever-increasing expenditure. Thus, in several years, more than half the national budget went towards the army, and yet the men lacked uniforms, weapons and ammunition and often went for months without pay.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, they were reluctant to fight foreign enemies in return for glory but only too willing to follow an ambitious officer planning a revolt who promised them promotions and money in return for their support.

In contrast, the affluent life-style of nouveau riche generals with their city mansions and country estates became a matter of public scandal. Santa Anna is the most obvious example, becoming a millionaire owner of extensive lands in the Veracruz region, but he was by no means the only successful general to seek the social status which landownership undoubtedly conferred. Indeed, most of the top generals, despite low official

<sup>11</sup> *El Siglo XIX*, 19 August 1845.

<sup>12</sup> A vivid picture of a bedraggled army with its camp followers is given in F. Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (London, 1970), p. 426.

<sup>13</sup> For a summary of the annual military budget, see Tenenbaum, *Politics of Penury*, pp. 180-1.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

salaries and little or no inherited wealth, promptly acquired substantial rural holdings.

The structure of the army was based on a series of general commands located in about twenty strategic points scattered across the immense area of the country from Yucatán in the south to Coahuila in the north. Each of these units was in the charge of a commander general, and it was from their ranks that most of the rebellious officers were to appear. Although in theory controlled by central command, the Minister of War and, ultimately, the president, in practice the commander generals enjoyed virtual autonomy in their respective regions, and when in the 1830s authority over civilian affairs was combined with their military powers, they were tantamount to provincial autocrats. This was particularly the case in the distant peripheral regions to the north and south such as Sonora, Durango, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Yucatán and Chiapas. In those areas nearer the capital – Veracruz, Puebla, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro and so on – to which it was practical, although rarely possible, to march an army to castigate a dissident officer, their power was more directly supervised. Even within these nearer areas, however, the central government was often powerless to impose its will, and local military caudillos like General Juan Alvarez, who ruled Acapulco and its hinterland for more than thirty years, were independent of all national authority. Similar locally based chieftains – in some cases incipient family dynasties – emerged in most provinces, and like their contemporaries in the River Plate and elsewhere in the southern continent, they were able to rule their domains for many years, acquiring extensive landholdings for themselves and sufficient powers of patronage or influence to be able to manipulate the political sphere regardless of the wishes or orders of the central government. Furthermore, proximity to the capital worked both ways; most of the successful revolts began in areas in the central cone. More often than not, rebellions consisted of an initial declaration by a local commander, who would usually have obtained promises of support from neighbouring commanders. If the central provinces – that is, their military garrisons – united behind the call to arms, the regime in Mexico City knew that its time was limited and that resistance would be futile. Occasionally, doubting the strength of the rebel movement, they refused to capitulate, and the result was bloody and destructive conflict in and around the capital with rebels marched in from the surrounding regions.<sup>14</sup>

The apparently almost endless series of *pronunciamientos* must nevertheless be kept in proportion. The division of the military commands reflected

<sup>14</sup> See e.g., my article on the July 1840 revolt, 'A *Pronunciamiento* in Nineteenth Century Mexico: 15 de julio de 1840', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 4 (1988), 245–64.



*An introduction*

9

the regional character of independent Mexico, which did not exist as a single, unified nation. 'Many Mexicos' is an apt phrase to describe the diversity, isolation and virtual autonomy of many provinces regardless of the constitutional framework of federal or central republic, military dictatorship, or, in due course, monarchy. Hence, of the hundreds of revolts which took place – so many that nobody has yet counted them – relatively few can be described as nationally oriented, that is, having as their objective the overthrow of the national government. Most were concerned with purely local issues or rivalries between competing factions, and if they were centred in places where there was a ready flow of cash, for example, in or near a major port like Tampico or Veracruz, often the purpose was financial, as the winner took possession of the customs house revenues. The regional diversity of Mexico's economy was also at times a contributory factor in the *pronunciamiento* syndrome as local interest groups strived to protect their position. Tobacco and cotton farmers in Veracruz, textile manufacturers in Puebla, miners in Zacatecas did not hesitate to seek the support of their local military commander in their efforts to influence national economic policy, and merchants in several regions on at least one occasion combined to encourage and finance a revolt.<sup>15</sup> Mexico remained a nation of very loosely connected parts; the national government based in the capital had little effective control over the central cone and almost none over the periphery, where Texas had little difficulty in achieving independence and Yucatán was easily able to break away to set up a separate state on more than one occasion.

Just as the central government was unable to control the provincial military, its influence on regional economic life was also minimal. Economic policy – for example, on the terms of trade and particularly the free trade versus protectionism debate – was dictated in Mexico City, but the decisions were rarely enforceable and often ignored by local interests. Recent research suggests that, in some areas, certain aspects of economic activity made a fairly rapid recovery after the devastation of the war in spite of the political chaos or policy dictates at the national level.<sup>16</sup> The impact of the war varied, of course, according to region. In response to changing markets and trade patterns inevitably disrupted by the separation from Spain and technology, adjustments were made by industrial and agricultural producers, and the image of the typical absentee landowner, blind to commercial criteria and innovation, has long since been dispelled.

15 See my article, 'The Triangular Revolt in Mexico and the Fall of Anastasio Bustamante, August–October, 1841', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 20 (1988), 337–60.

16 M. Chowning, 'The Contours of the Post-1810 Depression in Mexico: A Reappraisal', unpublished conference paper. Chowning gives an excellent analysis of recent work by economic historians in this paper, and on the basis of her study of Michoacán, she concludes that economic recovery started much earlier than hitherto thought.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Clearly, areas as far distant from the centre as the Californias were to all intents and purposes independent and left to their own devices to implement national policy as and when it suited them. Other frontier areas, like Chihuahua and Sonora in the north, were also largely cut off from central control and again were left to depend on their own resources when it came, for example, to defending themselves against the constant incursions of hostile nomadic Indian tribes, or *bárbaros* as they were known. Such areas, in political, military and economic matters, were largely autonomous, and while they paid lip service to the concept of national unity, they remained on the margin of national affairs, contributing little or nothing in taxation or military conscription, which were always the two main demands of central government.

Regional interests were certainly prominent, therefore, in the postindependence period, but it would be wrong to depict Mexico as nothing more than a disparate collection of autonomous provinces, each developing its own economic and political structures. A national government existed, made policy and enacted legislation which was applicable, even if not enforceable, in all regions. Every government was well aware of the tensions which threatened territorial disintegration, and conscious efforts were made from the time of Iturbide onwards to promote a sense of national identity. The victory over Spain had instilled a sense of national pride and patriotism, and while certain very marginal groups of Indians and isolated, self-sufficient rural communities were largely immune to the significance of monuments, national holidays and celebrations of past Mexican victories and heroes, a sense of loyalty to the nation as well as to locality or region was developing. Above all, within the literate middle class, which I will discuss later in this introduction, there was a marked sense of national pride, regardless of place of birth or residence. Sharing common social and cultural values, they tended to differ only on the political means whereby they could best defend their privileged status. Alamán, among many other politicians, was to try to use this feeling of class solidarity precisely to overcome regional differences and rivalries.

Nevertheless, despite the many efforts to create a sense of national identity and unity following independence, the characteristic feature of the Age of Santa Anna was undeniably regional diversity and tension. Regionalism and diversity of economic and other interests had, of course, existed in colonial times, when methods of transport, roads and communications were even more primitive, but in the highly regulated colonial society, the two great unifying forces of Crown and Church had been sufficient to hold the pieces together. The end of the monarchy, which came to be looked on by some Mexicans as a mistake, loosened the bonds of unity and gave way to incessant demands for a federal form of government which reflected regional interests and aspirations. The