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The Mexican Revolution

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ON THE SLOW TRAIN from Mexico City to Cuernavaca—so slow that a tall man can reach out the window and pick orchids—armed soldiers still ride in somnolent vigilance. There is nothing for them to do, but since revolutionary orders pertaining to military escort on this particular line were never rescinded, the soldiers still ride. The escort is a late and empty manifestation of a once-violent spirit. One cannot yet say with certainty when the Mexican Revolution ended; rather than ending, it seems to have transformed itself piecemeal into diverse phenomena. Its sudden and tumultuous beginning on November 20, fifty years ago, was in strong contrast to the slow dwindling-off of its last effects. Confusion has reigned over much of the fifty-year period.

In Mexico as in the rest of the Western world, however, a pattern of events and attitudes is plainly discernible. History is the work of the human will; but the human will operates in a confusing context, and the ever-increasing complexity of societies everywhere has changed much that is personal into the impersonal, much that is idealistic into the expedient, much that is free into the inhibited. Valid or not, Ortega y Gasset's theory of a "de-humanization" of the arts in the twentieth century leads us to ponder an analogous theory: a "dehumanization of history" in approximately the same era.

Such a theory appears to contradict a patent reality, the exalted personalism of Mexican politics from the struggles for independence from Spain to the present. But though Mexico continues to live off the fruits of hyperpersonal politicians, since around 1920 these fruits have been substantially different from their nineteenth-century seeds. Poverty lingers; federal and state governments are not as democratically formed as they might be; graft is still a quick means to success; agricultural development is still hampered by a complex deviation of selfish interests and by adverse conditions of world

The Mexican Revolution

a survey

PETER G. EARLE

trade. But over the past fifty years there has undeniably been social, economic and cultural progress. The *person* has undoubtedly tended to submit to the institutionalism of revolution and evolution, but this is the fate of the entire Western world and Asia as well. One senses in Mexico what Martin Buber has called "the tyranny of the exuberantly growing It." The trajectory from the personal to the impersonal shows itself in the characteristic names of successive regimes. The period from 1876 to 1910 is identified by the first name of its predominant personage, Porfirio Díaz, from which derive the adjective *porfiriano* and the nouns *porfiriato* and *porfirismo*. In the initial phases of the Revolution persons still overshadow principles and programs, but strongmen of the various revolutionary factions lend their last names rather than their first to their respective movements: *carrancismo* comes from Venustiano Carranza, *huertismo* from Victoriano Huerta, *zapatismo* from Emiliano Zapata. After 1920 metamorphosis becomes evident; the Revolution and its ensuing reforms comprise an entity in themselves, above the desires and grudges of certain individuals. The one party in power since 1920 first identified itself as the Partido Revolucionario Nacional; later it assumed the somewhat paradoxical name of Partido Revolucionario *Institucional*, a symbol of the undeniable trend from anarchic, personal dynamism to institutional control.

On the other hand, a very evident sensitiveness and appreciation of the social needs of the individual has consistently characterized the Revolution. If its machinery has become impersonal, its principles have become increasingly humane. The dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, by contrast, was intensely personal but also basically inhumane. Díaz' method of dealing with poverty, the scarcity of public schools, and slave labor in mines and on plantations was simply to ignore them insofar as he could.

I. The First Antecedents

The explosive and often barbaric nature of the twentieth-century Mexican Revolution makes sense only in the light of Mexican history in the nineteenth century. Circumstances were chaotic and subject to individual caprice. Between 1821 and 1876 there were no fewer than seventy-four administrations, and at times two or three existed simultaneously. All machinations were fair in the desire to govern. In 1829, for example, a turncoat Royalist officer named

Bustamante had recently become vice president. But his ambition went higher. Bustamante arranged to have the president (Vicente Guerrero)—who as the time was visiting the Pacific port of Acapulco—invited aboard a ship to have lunch with some cabinet members. Guerrero had no sooner eaten his first hors d'oeuvre when anchors were away. The ship sailed off to another port where Guerrero was quickly and quietly assassinated.

It was about this time that Antonio López de Santa Anna, a vain, pseudo-Napoleon, faithless to all men and causes, and an exemplary coward, began his intermittent despotism of twenty-five years. When a plague swept Mexico City in 1834 and was interpreted by many as divine punishment for an irreligious nation, Santa Anna (who had been elected president in 1832) assumed dictatorial powers. His pretext was the following:

It is very true that I threw up my cap for liberty with great ardor, and perfect sincerity, but very soon found the folly of it. A hundred years to come my people will not be fit for liberty. They do not know what it is, unenlightened as they are, and under the influence of a Catholic clergy a despotism is the proper government for them. But there is no reason why it should not be a wise and virtuous one.

It was neither the first nor the last time that a purely personalist remedy would be prescribed for Mexico, and Santa Anna, who was literally to crawl before Sam Houston after an ignominious defeat in Texas, was probably the most absurd example. A much later and different example of the traditional do-it-myself predisposition occurs in the last year of the Díaz regime (1910), when a government-controlled Mexico City newspaper offered a prize for the best "calculation" of the Federal District's population. The Dirección de Estadística, which had been set up in the 1890's for the purpose of efficient census taking, had done a poor job in 1900 and was not further to be trusted. But only by the wildest stretch of Mexican—or Hispanic—imagination, could *one person* do a better job.

However, one should not assume because of the chaotic mismanagement of self-seeking regimes in the nineteenth century that no significant advances were realized. Idealistic precepts were set in the Reform and Constitution of 1857 which would be readily adaptable to the circumstances accompanying promulgation of the Constitution of 1917: separation of Church and State, free public education, equitable distribution of arable lands, and so on. The

historical evolution of Mexico, like that of most of Hispanic America, was highly accelerated. In little over one hundred years it was undergoing changes roughly equivalent to those undergone in Western Europe over a period of five centuries. The Mexican phenomenon is all the more astounding when we consider that substantial progress was not made until after 1910. It is true that this progress would have been impossible without the struggles for Independence from 1810 to 1821, and without the social idealism that inspired Benito Juárez' attempts at sweeping reforms from 1856 to 1872. Progress was also abetted by Porfirio Díaz' development of railroads, mines and oilfields, instruments which the revolutionaries would later effectively utilize against the old regime. But, for the most part, the nineteenth-century attitude was anarchic and anti-progressive until 1876, and regimented and anti-progressive after that. In *The Meeting of East and West*, Northrop presents Mexico in the nineteenth century as an example of Comte's law of evolution from the theological through the metaphysical to the positive. Northrop based his analogy on the premise that during the first sixty years of the century Mexican intellectuals were influenced primarily by the liberalism of the French Enlightenment, and that the intellectuals of the Díaz regime were receptive to French positivism. But in neither of these eras did intellectuals prevail. Mexico lived instead in the shadow of the personal dynamism of Santa Anna, Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz. Democracy, liberalism, even positivism, were pass-words rather than guiding principles. Before 1876, anarchy, dissension and greed within, and flagrant intervention by the United States and France from without, had come close to annihilating Mexico as a national entity. In many respects, the era of Porfirio Díaz was more feudal than positivist, a fact indispensable to any pertinent discussion of the Revolution.

II. *The Díaz Regime*

Relatively few are enthusiastic today about the profusely bemedaled, semi-literate despot that was Porfirio Díaz. He is of course fondly remembered by a nostalgic minority. Elderly orthodox ladies recall the days of sweet waltz music and atrocious imitations of French architecture, of fine clothes and carriages, and of "decent people" ("gente decente"). This was a time when the rural Indian and the plebian ("gente indecente") knew their places. Díaz

quickly substituted military control for politics. Had he been better educated, he would have read enthusiastically from Machiavelli that "a prince . . . must not mind incurring the charge of cruelty for the purpose of keeping his subjects united and faithful; for, with very few examples he will be more merciful than those who, from excess of tenderness, allow disorders to rise, whence spring bloodshed and rapine; for these as a rule injure the whole community, while the executions carried out by the prince injure only individuals." By a doctrine known as "bread or sticks" (*pan o palos*), he announced to all involved in federal, state and municipal government that cooperation would merit reward from the public treasury; opposition would result in extermination. The rural police, which in its organization included many ex-highwaymen and murderers, made Mexico the "safest country in the world." In Díaz' own words:

We began by punishing robbery with death and requiring the execution of culprits within a few hours after they were caught and condemned. It had been the habit to cut the telegraph lines. We ordered that when the wires were cut, and the chief officer of that district failed to catch the criminal, he should himself suffer; and should the cutting occur on a plantation, the proprietor who failed to prevent it must be hanged to the telegraph pole nearest to the point where the wire was severed. These, of course, were military orders.

Alcoholism, prostitution, acceptance of Christian charity, were interpreted by Porfirian philosophy as personal, individual debilities with no roots whatever in the nation's social structure. About public education, Díaz was in theory concerned and in reality indifferent. A few model schools were constructed for propaganda purposes in the Federal District, while the nation at large was neglected. The illiteracy rate, which had been about 75 per cent in 1875, was over 80 per cent in 1910. Church and State publicly called for educational reforms, while in private systematically avoiding any action which might have led to their fulfillment.

Communal lands had belonged to the Indian villages since before the Conquest. These were confiscated. A common device of government agents was to induce Indians by gifts of alcohol, a chicken or a basket of corn, to sign false deeds to the desired properties. By this and other ruses "surveying companies," set up in 1883 and newly empowered in 1894, "transferred" or "bought" 180,000,000 acres. The beneficiaries were rich hacendados, many of

whom were Spanish, and also some Americans. A few ranches grew to areas of more than 300,000 acres. The result of this treachery was that about 97 per cent of those who tilled the soil owned nothing. They were called peons (*peon* also means "pawn" in a chess game). It is also well known that Díaz encouraged foreign investment to the extent that it exploited virtually all natural resources. It is true that he expanded the railroad lines from 500 miles in 1876 to 15,000 in 1910, but Americans held all the bond issues. Under his guidance oil production increased rapidly, but Americans and British owned the wells. Germans controlled the hardware and drug trade; Spaniards, the grocery stores and other small retail shops. In effect, Mexico was again a colony, not just of Spain, but of the United States and a good part of Europe. In 1910 James Creelman, a wide-eyed but not very perceptive American reporter, concluded with unconscious irony that "the republic, under the direction of President Díaz, maintains such admirable relations with other nations that it has not been found necessary to build up a Mexican navy." Inherent in all Hispanic American countries, until very recently, has been a notable lack of even token navies. To say that no Mexican navy had been "found necessary" is comparable to saying today that sidewalk dwellers in Calcutta have no real need of housing. Eleven major violations by Europe of the Monroe Doctrine between 1829 and 1864—all uncontested by the United States—and fifteen cases of armed intervention by the United States in Hispanic America between 1831 and 1933 seem to suggest that some use might have been found for defensive navies, or, at least, for a few strategically located gunboats. Equally naïve, President William Howard Taft observed that by 1910 the thirty to forty thousand Americans residing in Mexico had invested \$500,000; thereby they had "greatly contributed to the prosperity of that republic." That prosperous republic in which the peon's wage of about 12½ cents a day had remained unchanged for a hundred years, and in which living costs had risen from 150 to 400 per cent.

III. Violence

By 1900, elements of discord were showing. In that year a Liberal Party was quietly formed, and in 1906 it issued a proclamation. In the same year there were three important strikes and in 1907 there were twenty-five. Porfirio

Díaz announced in 1908 that he would not run for office again. But Francisco Madero, who had written a book on the need for moderate election reforms and who was gaining wide support as the opposition candidate, was imprisoned in the spring of 1910, when it became apparent that he might win. However Madero escaped to Texas; in San Antonio he issued a proclamation demanding Díaz' resignation and honest elections. On November 20 the Revolution began. When in May 1911, Díaz resigned and Madero took office, all Mexico rejoiced.

Francisco Madero had a unique quality: honesty. He was an idealist who believed that democratic theory was immediately applicable to hungry Mexico. Furthermore, he was an apostle of non-violence. But his honesty, his idealism and his principle of non-violence were the three main causes of his destruction. The poverty-stricken lower class needed land and a living wage, and though Madero had the will, he lacked the means to immediate reforms. An illiterate Indian, Emiliano Zapata—the impetuous “Attila of the South”—issued a manifesto against Madero scarcely a month and a half after the latter had assumed office. Zapata's farm laborers cried for “Land and Freedom”; uninformed as to political history, they were not concerned about clean elections or altruistic concepts of personal integrity. The Zapatistas did not wait. Throughout the states of Morelos, Mexico, Puebla and Oaxaca they plundered and burned and managed to take by force some of the farm land they had set out to get. Zapata was to continue his astute guerrilla tactics until his assassination in 1919. Of all the revolutionary armies his was the most flexible and the most difficult to combat. It would attack in small groups and when in danger would simply disappear, as its white-clad soldier-peons returned temporarily to their farming chores.

Madero was also besieged by conspirators, who, witnessing his inability to convert his country suddenly to prosperity, had their eye on the presidency. Curiously, the only powerful figure who remained faithful up to the time of Madero's assassination in February 1913, was the notorious Pancho Villa, who for all his barbarism knew how to preserve a personal loyalty when he felt like it. All the public indignation and private corruption nurtured by a century of anarchy and then of dictatorial oppression eventually exploded in Madero's face. Many historians have exaggerated Madero's weakness. They accuse him of failing to right an awesome accumulation of wrongs, which

were in fact the result of a century of corruption and despotism. How was he, or anyone else, to set it all right within a year?

The United States has traditionally been more than a mere spectator in the political crises of Hispanic America. No better example of this than the circumstances of Madero's resignation and death. In complicity with Porfirio Díaz' nephew Felix Díaz, Victoriano Huerta maneuvered himself toward the presidency. After several meetings in the United States Embassy between our meddling Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson and representatives of Huerta and Felix Díaz, it was decided that Madero should resign. But he was imprisoned as a security measure, later to be treacherously shot together with the vice president. In a state of complete inebriation, Victoriano Huerta stepped to a balcony of the National Palace and declared himself president.

The Revolution underwent three general phases. The initial or idealistic phase—one historian has called it the *lyrical* phase—ended with the death of Madero. The second, or military phase ended in 1920 with the death of President Carranza. The third, or consolidating phase ended in 1940 with the completion of Lázaro Cárdenas' six-year term. Each of the four caudillos who dominated the history of Mexico in the bloody period from 1913 to 1920 was in his time assassinated. Thinking of the situation dispassionately, one ventures to say that each of these assassinations was indispensable to progress. This is so because military operations and the accompanying carnage and plunder prior to 1920 had converted Madero's revolution into a useless civil war. Personal gain was the real motivation for fighting, Villistas and Zapatistas against Carrancistas and Obregonistas, then, Obregonistas against Carrancistas. The symbolic serpent on the Mexican flag seemed to be strangling the symbolic eagle.

Undeniably, there were during the presidency of the ex-Porfirian Senator Venustiano Carranza specific theoretical advances. The Constitution of 1917 declared that the nation directly owned all minerals and raw materials in the subsoil, a decree which caused considerable consternation among the foreign oil and mining companies. The same article declared that *all* property was subject to "conditional ownership," paving the way for eventual return of much arable land to the peons. Wage and hour laws were established. The Church was excluded from public education. Carranza, however, felt no revolutionary fire within him. He accepted but had no hand in composing

the Constitution. Moreover, he was surrounded by greedy and unprincipled military chieftains who looted the treasury and used the new agrarian laws to enlarge their private haciendas. Carranza also acquired notoriety for the systematic liquidation of his personal enemies, Zapata and the talented general Felipe Angeles among them.

Francisco Villa outlived his usefulness. Though not an articulate idealist, Pancho was capable of great sentiment. In the Aguascalientes convention of revolutionary generals in late 1914 he made an incoherent speech on the need for brotherhood among chieftains and, embracing Carranza, confessed in a profusion of tears that he had been planning his assassination for some time. At this moment he repented. Villa's makeshift cavalry ranged through the north and center of the country, plundering and looting. Long after his decisive defeat by Obregón's army of fierce Yaqui Indians, he continued his guerrilla activities in the North, provoked a punitive military mission from the United States and outfoxed General Pershing on several occasions. Villa had a strong, sentimentalized notion of rural Mexico's plight, but like Carranza, he eventually proved to be a serious detriment to the Revolution. While driving a new sports sedan to the bank on a spring day of 1923, he met his doom. His body was mangled by machine-gun fire and on the floor beside him was a bag of gold. The reward for his assassination was large.

IV. Consolidation

Little by little violence subsided, and each successive regime was more revolutionary. The least revolutionary part of the Revolution was actually its primary, violent phase. As Carranza hastily departed from Mexico City in a private train carrying a handsome portion of the treasury's bullion, Alvaro Obregón took over in December 1920. Obregón was the first revolutionary president to bring about radical reforms. He managed to expropriate some of the hacienda lands. Organized labor acquired great power and Obregón's minister of education, José Vasconcelos, established 1,000 rural elementary schools, recruited and trained many teachers.

Plutarco Elías Calles dominated politics for the ten years following his inauguration in 1924. He was more revolutionary, more intransigent and

more extremist than his predecessor. He expropriated more lands than Obregón had expropriated, but too few of them, owing to mysterious administrative difficulties, reached the peasants for whom they were intended.

Lázaro Cárdenas brought the Revolution to its culmination. More thoroughgoing but more civilized than his predecessors, he was able to restrain his most serious enemies without having them executed. More rural schools were built, more lands expropriated. Railroads were nationalized, as were the oil fields in 1938. Some precepts of the Constitution of 1917 were being fulfilled, and for the first time, the personal endeavors of a Mexican chief of state coincided with an articulate plan of government. More leftist than any of his predecessors, Cárdenas incurred the criticism of many who charge that his openly socialistic measures had adverse financial effects, evidence of which is the growing indebtedness of the oil industry and the railroads. In part, the criticism is valid, but the fact remains that Mexico's national economy has grown steadily stronger, and there is no doubt that the country has grown out of its ignominious status as a bargain colony for foreign exploitation.

And democracy prevails. If individuals have become politically subservient to a system, the so-called institutional party to which they cater has been able to recognize individual needs and rights. The essential freedom of the person is nowhere more jealously guarded than in Mexico. Corruption has by no means disappeared, but the acute sense of caricature that it inspires everywhere reveals that its degenerative power has weakened. Perhaps the most encouraging thing of all is that a new culture has accompanied Mexico's new autonomy. There are better poets, essayists and novelists today than at any time before the Revolution.

Revolutions grow out of basically bad circumstances; primarily they attempt to recover values, rights and privileges which, over a relatively long period of time, a relatively large group of people have lost. Only in a very vague and secondary sense, it seems to me, are revolutions utopian dreams of something new. Revolutions spring from oppression, not enlightenment, because oppression is unwittingly the greatest conditioner of the spirit. Rousseau would not have written his *Social Contract* without consciousness of militant social evils. Marxism would never have developed had not a new kind of poverty grown out of the industrial revolution. Simón Bolívar took advantage

of the chaotic political state of decadent colonialism in order to lead South America to independence—the struggles for independence were also a *revolution*. And the wealthy idealist, Francisco Madero, would have neither said nor done anything had his conscience not been nettled by the iniquities of Porfirio Díaz' regime. So it is that the revolutionary is moved to act, and his action is an interrogation which may or may not lead to the examination of all possible enlightenments.

The Suffolk Weavers

Dedham and Lavenham, Stoke-by-Nayland and Kersey
With their towering churches and vacant mansionry stare
On the swallow weaving patterns of sunny silence,
As if at their Tudor heyday, unaware
How giant-powered machines from Wharfe to Mersey
Have stripped their monopoly bare.

The master-merchants who built for their own self-blazon,
And sometimes for God's, and loosed from their pious fists
Enough and no more to keep the cottage-weavers
Alive in body till blindness crept with her mists,
Alike shall weave no more, the meek and the brazen.
Only this quiet persists.

And we, the same weft of good and evil, who fashion
Our life and art in a terror-whispering place,
Threatened by similar wheels of social changes
That will as surely antique our race—
O may we leave for the centuries' far compassion
Such beauty's redeeming grace.

—Geoffrey Johnson