

An Anthropologist Orders a Beer

The Development of Mexican Nationalism

The turmoil associated with the decade-long armed segment of Mexico's revolution provoked widespread concern as to how the country would remake itself into a viable entity once the violence ended. The factional nature of the struggle itself—there weren't two sides to this conflict, but many—ensured that a wide range of voices expressed opinions on the direction that Mexico should take. The issue of establishing a national aesthetic as a means of unification played a significant role in this discussion, which began midconflict. Some of the early manifestations of what might be regarded as Mexican nationalism arose from an appreciation of the land's indigenous heritage when it was still part of Spain. Although the willingness to more fully embrace the indigenous components of its culture was largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, by the late nineteenth century Mexican intellectuals understood the nation to be essentially mestizo, or mixed race. It was from these premises that discussions about Mexico's national art departed.

For Carlos Monsiváis, the nation's postrevolutionary circumstances obliged the government to take action on the cultural front. The struggle had shown its leaders that "Europe was not only too distant, Mexico (its cruelty, its barbarity, its primitivism) was too near."¹ The government's prime motivator was to establish some sense of stability and unity to replace the divisiveness of its civil war. The followers of Pancho Villa (1878–1923) trended socialist; the forces behind Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919) leaned anarchist, while the supporters of Venustiano Carranza (1859–1920), who ended up leading the nation, were mostly classical liberals.² In the view of Mexican-born anthropologist Anita Brenner, the revolution was formed by multiple bands, each "like a tribe, a class unto itself, with its chief, its code, its own currency, its songs, its tactics and its war whoop," which—although

it failed to account for the substantial number of citizens who opposed the revolutionary movement altogether—vividly captured the complexity of the nation’s political situation.³

The nation’s new leaders saw promotion of selected elements from its popular culture as the most viable response to the challenge of reweaving the raveled threads of its political tapestry into something resembling a coherent whole. As Rick López notes, Mexico’s early postrevolutionary government was far too weak and impoverished to take definitive actions to effectively dictate the content of a new nationalist art.⁴ Nonetheless, it was during this time that the foundations of much of what came to define postrevolutionary Mexico began to receive state support.⁵ Enrique Krauze even classified what he called the postrevolutionary government’s “cultural originality” as its greatest claim to legitimacy.⁶

MEXICAN NATIONALISM BEFORE MEXICO

For Benedict Anderson, it was among the Creoles, American-born individuals of European ancestry in Spanish America, that nationalism itself was born. In one of its earliest manifestations, the Jesuit Francisco Javier Clavijero (1731–1787), born in what is now Mexico, wrote his 1780 *Storia antica del Messico* (History of Ancient Mexico) to rebut the arguments of European authors that the preconquest peoples of the New World were mere savages. Clavijero’s history treated indigenous Americans as equals to their European conquerors. As historian Enrique Florescano points out, this allowed Clavijero’s history to evolve into “a symbol of Creole patriotism and a historical argument to demand the independence of the nation.”⁷ Arguments of legitimacy based on such historical ties would become one of the bedrocks of later concepts of nationalism across the globe. .

The resurrection of the past as a national symbol became more widely visible, at least in Mexico City, in 1790 when a public works project in the Zócalo, the city’s principal plaza, unearthed the Aztec Sunstone and a massive sculpture of the earth goddess Coatlicue. The sunstone, with its orderly, calendarlike arrangement, engaged the sensibilities of Mexico’s viceregal leaders, then heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought. It was placed on an exterior wall of the cathedral for all to see. There, as historian Salvador Rueda points out, it began its life as “a work of art” and “became an emblem of a glorious (albeit unknown) millenary history that prefigured Mexican nationalism.”⁸ The statue of the serpent-headed goddess dressed in the snakeskin skirt secured with a human skull was more challenging to

the dominant tastes and sensibilities of the Enlightenment in Mexico and was soon reburied. Benito María Moxó y Francoli (1763–1816), bishop of Michoacán, claimed that “said statue . . . reignited the poorly extinguished passion for idolatry among the Indian converts.”⁹

The dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe also served as what Hobsbawm called a protonationalist symbol in Mexico.¹⁰ The first flag of the insurgency, which established Mexico’s independence from Spain, featured the Virgin of Guadalupe—a Christianized version of the Aztec mother goddess Tonantzin—on one side and a serpent-devouring eagle perched atop a cactus, a symbol of the Aztec foundation of what would become Mexico City, on the other in a conjunction that began in the mid-seventeenth century.¹¹

A MESTIZO NATION AND ITS SYMBOLS

As committed as the regime of Porfirio Díaz was to modernizing Mexico through creating infrastructure and adopting mostly French cultural norms, it was equally dedicated to reinforcing its legitimacy as an heir to the Aztecs. Díaz would use this argument both internally and externally. For domestic consumption, his government would erect an impressive monument to the last Aztec ruler, Cuauhtémoc (1497?–1525), honoring his ceaseless resistance to the Spanish conquistadors. For international consumption, he would employ references to Aztec and Mayan architecture to represent Mexico at world’s fairs in Paris and the United States.¹² In what Mexican historian Juan Ortega y Medina called “archeological Monroism,” the United States also leaned on Mexico’s prequest past to refute European arguments that it lacked the history necessary to be taken seriously as a nation.¹³ As Ortega y Medina describes it, Mayan ruins promoted as “American” by adventurer and erstwhile diplomat John Lloyd Stephens (1805–1852) helped the United States assert a native cultural independence that justified its political independence.

Díaz had been a leader of Mexico’s resistance to the imposition of French power following its invasion in 1861 during the Second French Empire. Mexico’s charros, the accomplished horsemen of its rural haciendas, had played major roles in the resistance movement that expelled the French.¹⁴ Rather ironically, Maximilian I, the ill-fated French “emperor” of Mexico, also chose to present himself as a charro, which temporarily made the horsemen’s attire fashionable among Mexico City’s upper classes.¹⁵ Following Maximilian’s fall, the charro attire became associated with the largely mestizo republican forces that had ousted him. By 1884 Mexico City’s first

Orquesta Típica (Typical Orchestra), dedicated to playing popular Mexican music, attired itself in charro outfits.¹⁶ This attire is still in use today by mariachi bands across the globe. Mexico's national symbol of masculinity became firmly entrenched at about the same time that the China poblana and the Tehuana began to emerge regionally as symbols of femininity—their rise to full national status would occur following the revolution. By then, López argues, they had become nothing more than a particular style of dress.¹⁷

Although the idea that Mexico as an “indivisible nation” made up of “all classes . . . and races” had even been propounded by Maximilian I, the concept of Mexico as a mestizo nation came to the fore during the Díaz administration.¹⁸ The publication of the four-volume *México a través de los siglos* (Mexico across the Centuries), beginning in 1884 under the direction of historian Vicente Riva Palacio (1832–1896), made the idea that the nation was united by its racially mixed people the unofficial policy of the state.¹⁹

MANUEL GAMIO AND MEXICO'S MANY NATIONS

With the revolution that ousted Díaz from his stranglehold on the presidency still boiling in Mexico's northern states, anthropologist Manuel Gamio (1883–1960) traveled to the Yucatán as the government's inspector general of archeological monuments. During a break from his professional activities, he sat down to a meal at a restaurant in Mérida and was offered the option of an imported beer. Expecting something from Germany or the United States, Gamio opted for the import. When the waiter returned with a Dos Equis from Orizaba, in the state of Veracruz, Gamio repeated his request for an imported beer. “That's the only foreign beer we have available,” the waiter replied. “If you'd like a national beer, I can bring you something from the Yucatán.”²⁰

Following further protests that the Yucatán was part of Mexico, Gamio yielded to the waiter's argument that Dos Equis beer was a foreign commodity. In his 1916 book *Forjando patria* (Forging a Nation), Gamio enlarged on the waiter's points as he explained why the Yucatán saw itself as a separate entity: Unlike the rest of Mexico, most of its inhabitants could communicate in both Spanish and Mayan; although there were gradations in the quality of clothing, both rich and poor dressed in the same simple white cotton outfits and straw hats; they all used hammocks instead of beds for sleeping. Even the state's music and dance, Gamio concluded, were different from that of the rest of Mexico.²¹