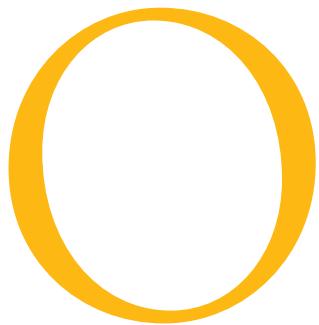


# Independence, Revolution, and Celebration in Mexico: 1810, 1910, and 2010

by BRIAN STAUFFER AND SALVADOR SALINAS



**ON THE NIGHT OF September 15, 1810,** a priest of Spanish descent, Father Miguel Hidalgo, rang the bells of the parish church at Dolores, Guanajuato, calling for the inhabitants of New Spain to overthrow their colonial rulers. Within a month, Hidalgo stood at the gates of Mexico City as head of an army of 60,000

peasant soldiers drawn from the haciendas of central Mexico. Although Hidalgo and his army would suffer defeat when victory seemed at hand, this movement began Mexico's long struggle for independence. It was a watershed, but Mexico would not become free until 1821, under Augustín Iturbide.

Two hundred years after Hidalgo's revolt, scholars continue to debate the meaning of Mexican independence. This year, 2010, the University of Texas at Austin is hosting an unprecedented number of events to commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of Mexico's independence movement and the centennial of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Organized by Associate Professor of Latin American History Susan Deans-Smith with the help of Gail Sanders, Program Coordinator of the Mexican Center of LLILAS, the program includes five panel discussions and several speakers. A Web site (<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/lilas/centers-and-programs/mexico/mexico2010.php>) designed by LANIC Content Director Kent Norsworthy, provides up-to-date information about the *Many Mexicos* events as well as links to the many other events related to the Mexican bicentenary and centenary celebrations taking place in Austin. Cosponsored by the Mexican Center at LLILAS, the History Department, and the Consulate General of Mexico in Austin, *Many Mexicos* represents a truly binational undertaking. It brings together numerous world-class scholars from the U.S., the UK, and Mexico, the latter traveling with the crucial support of the Mexican Consulate in Austin, to take stock of the gains of recent scholarship on Independence, the Revolution, and other pivotal moments in the country's historical development. UT provides an ideal setting for such events. The university boasts a world-class faculty of Latin American specialists across a number of disciplines, making it a leading institution in the production of knowledge about the region. The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection stands as one of the world's premier research libraries for the study of Mexico and Latin America more generally. Other resources for research on Mexico can be found

at the Harry Ransom Center, whose yearlong exhibit, *iViva! Mexico's Independence*, features a collection of rare documents and art from Mexican history.

But why spend an entire year commemorating Mexico's independence and revolution? As Prof. Mauricio Tenorio explained in his talk, celebrating history is as much about the present and future as it is about the past. The Mexican government, for example, uses the celebrations to construct a narrative of its own legitimacy and achievements and ensure the continuity of its rule. Recent scholarship on Mexico, on the other hand, has often worked to deconstruct such narratives, unearthing the many and diverse Mexicos that underlie the homogenized narrative of the government.<sup>1</sup>

At UT, the commemoration of 1810 and 1910 provides an opportunity for scholars to assess the achievements of the field of Mexican studies, to revisit its central questions, and to suggest directions for future research. Indeed, the *Many Mexicos* program of events reflects the field's most pressing concerns, including the role of indigenous people and the church in Mexican political history, the economic impacts of Independence and Revolution, and Mexico's place in the global capitalist system. The panels challenge scholars to consider the common threads underlying the 1810 and 1910 insurrections and to probe the spaces between and beyond those watershed events. Audience members at Héctor Aguilar Camín's talk, for example, pressed him to relate his thesis on the continuity of political culture before and after Independence to the current narco-wars. Certainly, the *Many Mexicos* events foster a lively dialog about the meaning of the Mexican past—a dialog that continues to reshape the conventional narrative of Independence and the Revolution.

The Mexican Independence movement grew out of a complex set of domestic and international crises, the most important of which stemmed from Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808. The Napoleonic crisis, in turn, unleashed a larger political debate within the Spanish empire about the relative benefits of monarchy and republicanism, and about the place of the American colonies in the larger system. In Mexico and other parts of Latin America, various constituencies clamored for the return of the deposed King Ferdinand VII, the creation of a constitutional monarchy, or outright independence. Independence didn't become a widely favored solution until the second decade of the nineteenth century, and even then, it meant different things to different people.

In Mexico, as Eric Van Young noted in his talk, two distinct movements drove the war against Spain. At the top, Mexicans of Spanish descent, or creoles, had a nationalist vision for Mexico. They resented Spain's control over the colony's natural resources, especially its lucrative silver trade monopoly, and Spanish domination of political positions. Mexican-born elites were shut out of the governance of their own land. Meanwhile, the masses of indigenous peasants of central Mexico had grievances of their own. For some, a quarrel with a local priest sparked their indignation; for others, the arrival of insurgent armies presented an opportunity to get even with a local Spanish authority. All told,

indigenous Mexicans made up over half of the insurgent armies. This more popular, indigenous movement, led by José Morelos, another priest, and Vicente Guerrero, was less coherent and articulate than that of the creoles, but it proved crucial to the weakening of Spain's grip on her valuable colony. The final push did not come until 1821, when a royalist general, Agustín Iturbide, struck a deal with Guerrero and switched sides. Spain's colonial rule came to an end, and Mexico emerged as an independent state.

But emancipation did not usher in an era of peace and prosperity. In fact, the war unleashed forces that would divide Mexico for decades after victory. A fundamental rift remained between those who favored the egalitarian, progressive vision of Hidalgo and Morelos on the one hand, and those who subscribed to Iturbide's monarchist, pro-clerical project. The new country faced other problems, as well. The economy was devastated. Indians remained oppressed. Elites could not agree on the future of the nation. The church jealously guarded its power and wealth. Civil wars and foreign invasions continually hindered the emergence of a viable Mexican nation-state. Only with the triumph of the Liberal Party of Benito Juárez in 1867 would one group become powerful enough to rule Mexico. Now Mexicans could build a representative democracy, free market economy, and bend the church to the will of the state.

Practice, however, would not match ideal Liberal theory. Porfirio Díaz rose to the Mexican presidency in 1876 and would rule the country for the next thirty-five years. Democracy languished as Díaz manipulated elections and installed his cronies in positions of

power. The church regained some authority. Capitalist development favored foreign investors over Mexican entrepreneurs. The rich gobbled up the best lands. Factory workers met police batons when they attempted to organize. Mexico achieved a degree of modernization and traded its natural resources with the world, but at a heavy price.

Díaz had shrewdly manipulated the contending political factions for decades, but the old dictator lost his touch by his eighth election. In 1908, he told an American journalist, James Creelman, that Mexico was ready for democracy; he would not run for reelection; and he welcomed the participation of opposition groups in the elections of 1910. His words opened the lid on a pressure cooker whose contents had been stewing for a generation. Francisco Madero, a Coahuilan landowner, spearheaded the democratic opening through the Anti-Reelectionist Party. He toured the nation, giving speeches to sympathetic crowds gathered in the country's public squares. He pledged to end absolute rule by one man and sweetheart deals with foreign investors. Representative democracy, a free press, restoration of village lands, and clean elections would solve Mexico's dilemmas. These promises fell upon sympathetic ears in the cities, towns, and villages. Middle-class professionals, landless farmers, and factory workers all could gain from Madero's program. Díaz, however, met the rising expectations with force. He slammed the lid on the simmering pressure cooker as quickly as he had opened it. Madero was jailed, the Anti-Reelectionist Party was repressed, the election was rigged, and Díaz won again.



On September 16, 1910, Mexico City held lavish ceremonies commemorating the one hundredth anniversary since Father Hidalgo revolted against Spain. Díaz wanted to show the world Mexico's progress, but outside the capital, in the towns and countryside, unrest stirred. Madero had jumped bail and fled to Texas. He issued a manifesto on November 20, 1910, calling for Mexicans to rise up and overthrow the Díaz dictatorship.

Insurgents in Chihuahua and Morelos, including the charismatic figures Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, responded to Madero's call. Within six months, Díaz resigned the presidency after a decisive rebel victory at the battle of Ciudad Juárez. The aging dictator's words as he boarded a ship to France from the port of Veracruz proved prophetic: "Madero has unleashed a tiger; let us see if he can control him." Open elections and democracy, Madero thought, would solve Mexico's problems. He was wrong. The Zapatistas in Morelos refused to lay down their arms until lands were returned to the pueblos, industrial workers began to strike and halt production at unprecedented rates, and the church and Federal army remained hostile to the new regime. A new round of revolutionary violence began in 1913 when the army deposed and shot Madero. Mexicans united to overthrow the military dictatorship a year later.

As in France and Russia, once the revolutionaries achieved victory, they started fighting among themselves. Who would rule Mexico? What reforms would be carried out? What role would workers and farmers play in a new economy? And the church? The old landlords? Where did they fit into this picture? Revolutionary armies swept in and out of Mexico City as these questions remained unsolved. The uncertainty culminated in major battles between the Zapatistas and Villistas on one hand, and forces of Álvaro Obregón and Venustiano Carranza (the moderate Constitutionalists) on the other. Carranza and Obregón, the most talented general of the war, prevailed in 1915 when Villa suffered major defeats in battles of the Bajío. The Constitutionalists assumed power in Mexico City and in 1917 wrote the most progressive constitution in the Americas to that point, promising workers power in the factories, farmers land, and Mexicans control over their natural resources.

Reform began slowly in the 1920s. Mexico's presidents Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles juggled the diverse interests of a

powerful and bloated army, mobilized farmers clamoring for land, urban workers demanding control in the factories, the Catholic Church resisting secularization of state and society, and U.S. pressure not to implement the reforms of the 1917 Constitution. Land was distributed selectively and in the regions where the rural movement was strongest—Morelos, the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley, and areas of Chihuahua. The only thing revolutionary about the regime by the late 1920s was its anticlerical project to break the power of the church. In 1926, the church-state conflict erupted when government hostility led the church to suspend religious services such as baptisms, marriages, funerals, and Masses. Some seventy thousand Mexicans perished in the religious war that came to be known as the *Cristiada*. Three years later, the conflict ended in a stalemate between the church and state, with Catholicism losing its legal authority but retaining influence over Mexicans' hearts and minds.

Church-state relations thawed into the 1930s, while the Great Depression exposed Mexico's need to fulfill the promises of the Revolution. Lázaro Cárdenas assumed the presidency in 1934 and allied with workers and farmers to carry out rapid reforms. He distributed some forty-four million acres of land to eight hundred thousand recipients. Urban workers gained unprecedented labor rights and won backing from the government in disputes with management. Economic nationalism reached its apogee in 1938 when Cárdenas expropriated American and British oil firms. The maneuver was supported by Mexicans of all political stripes: at no point before or since has the nation been so united behind the government. Through these popular measures, official party membership mushroomed to more than four million constituents, making it the most powerful organization to emerge from the Revolution. Urban and rural workers, the army, and the middle class formed the backbone of what came to be the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Historians consider 1940 and Mexico's entrance into the Second World War on the side of the Allies as the end of the revolutionary era. For the next three decades, during the so-called Mexican Miracle, the country experienced rapid urbanization, industrialization, economic growth, and unprecedented political stability. Only recently have historians begun to probe the myths and realities of the

PRI's golden age. Urban and rural workers largely remained supportive of the regime, but politicians increasingly prioritized business investment and economic growth over income redistribution and equality. The indigenous populations remained second-class citizens. Above all, the PRI dominated elections through cooptation and patronage. The official party ruled the national and state congresses, governorships, and the all-powerful presidency. In 1968, a student movement that sought to democratize the system encountered repression at the Tlatelolco massacre, in which hundreds of students were gunned down by Federal soldiers. Following this tragedy, repeated economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s began a long decline of the PRI's legitimacy and claim as the official embodiment of the Revolution. Poorly armed Indians in the highlands of Chiapas, calling themselves Zapatistas, turned the official narrative on its head in 1994, when they rebelled against the North American Free Trade Agreement and the failure of the regime to continue distributing land. For the first time in seventy years, the opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) won the presidency in 2000, bringing an end to the PRI's long domination of Mexican politics.

The PAN's socially conservative, free market program has steered Mexico far from the vision of revolutionary leaders like Zapata and Cárdenas, and the rise of powerful drug cartels has exposed cracks in the strong state built by the PRI after 1940. But the myths and memories of the Revolution continue to inform Mexican politics and culture in complicated ways. Scholars will have their hands full for decades to come exploring the road to 2010. While this year's centennial events have presented a perfect opportunity to appraise Mexico's recurrent social upheavals, it is still too early to predict how 2010 will be remembered by future generations.

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#### Note

1.The title *Many Mexicos* was inspired by historian Lesley Byrd Simpson's classic work of the same name, which alerted its readers to the complexity and heterogeneity of Mexico, both in terms of its environments and peoples. Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Many Mexicos* (New York: Putnam, 1941). \*