THE MYTH OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

I

In 2010 the Mexican Revolution has just turned one hundred. The predictable spate of commemorative — but not necessarily celebratory — literature has already begun.\(^1\) Compared with the grand self-congratulatory commemoration of 1960, which was held when the party born of the Revolution — the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional; Revolutionary Institutional Party) — still held a near-monopoly of political power,\(^2\) the current commemoration is likely to be rather more nuanced — that is to say, more respectful of history and less respectful of official ideology (not least because there is now no official ideology, the PRI having lost national, that is, presidential, power in 2000, after some seventy years in office).\(^3\) Some analysts attribute the fall of the PRI to its abandonment of revolutionary principles and ideas: the PRI fell because it ran out of discursive ammunition; it found itself firing blanks.\(^4\) Another way of putting this point would be to say that the ‘myth’ of the Mexican Revolution had evaporated, that it no longer conferred legitimacy as it had in the past: either because the people had given up believing in it; or, even if some still believed, because the regime had given up adhering to it. Either way, the ‘myth’ of the Revolution, its make-up and appeal, become crucial factors in the grand trajectory of twentieth-century Mexican politics. That the new wave of cultural historians,


\(^2\) México: cincuenta años de revolución (Mexico City, 1963).

\(^3\) As I note below, the ‘official’ party was established in 1929 and, under three successive titles — PNR (Partido Nacional Revolucionario), PRM (Partido de la Revolución Mexicana), PRI — ruled Mexico until 2000. It virtually monopolized elective office, in both the legislature and the executive (presidency and governorships), until the 1970s, when proportional representation gave the opposition a foothold in Congress; during the 1990s the opposition won a clutch of governorships; and, as I describe in conclusion, it finally secured the presidency in 2000.

particularly numerous in the United States, should place great store by such discursive and ‘mythical’ explanations is hardly surprising, given the strong dose of idealism — explanation based on the power and autonomy of ideas — which courses through their collective bloodstream. But the appeal of ‘myth’ goes wider: a recent analysis, written by a hard-headed Mexican economist and political commentator, asserts that the Revolution, whose hundredth birthday has just occurred, is nothing but myth: “the twentieth century is, for Mexico, the century of the Mexican Revolution. But this is a concept, not a fact. The Revolution which marks the [twentieth] century . . . never happened [nunca existió]. The Mexican Revolution on which was founded the political regime which ruled from 1938 and for nearly fifty years is a cultural construction.” So, the Revolution — as a ‘real’ historical process — never happened; it is a myth, created from above, by a myth-making state, albeit on the basis of some original raw materials. Thus, when the Mexican people belatedly became aware of this — that their ruling emperor had no clothes — they proceeded to vote him out of office in 2000.

Is this a valid view of twentieth-century Mexican history? In this article I consider the rise and fall of the ‘myth of the Mexican Revolution’ — that is, the bundle of ideas, images, icons, slogans and policies which became associated with the Revolution and the regime to which it gave birth. The form of the article is loosely narrative: it first locates the Revolution within the broader sweep of Mexican history and then describes and periodizes the ‘rise and fall’ (actually, I spend more time on the rise than the fall: an imbalance which reflects the limitations of space, of sources and of my own expertise). The article also embraces two arguments, of unequal scope and significance. The first argument, echoing the convincing analysis of Thomas Benjamin, contends that, given the origins and character of the armed revolution (1910–20), the formulation (rise) of the myth was slower and more halting than

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6 Macario Schettino, Cien años de confusión: México en el siglo XX (Mexico City, 2007), 13. The idiosyncratic reference to 1938 — the year of the oil expropriation — is meant to underline (I presume) the top-down, ideological creation of ‘the Revolution’ by the nationalist state.
often assumed. This argument chiefly concerns the architects of the myth (it is a ‘top-down’ argument). But I also try to say something about the ‘bottom-up’ manufacture, endorsement or repudiation of the myth. This is a vital, if difficult, topic, since the power of a myth obviously depends upon its capacity to diffuse, attract, charm and motivate. Myth-making being ‘a communication process which involves reception as well as communication’, a ‘good’ — in other words, successful — myth has to be a good ‘meme’.

So, how successful was the myth of the Mexican Revolution? My second argument is somewhat negative and, I think, more original: I suggest that the myth was less extensive and ‘successful’ than often supposed; and that its ‘decline’, too, was less crucial — as an ‘explanatory variable’ — than often supposed. To put it bluntly, many students of post-revolutionary Mexico, not just historians, have exaggerated the influence of ideas as compared to economics and interests. However, the phrase ‘than often supposed’ is one of those slippery formulas beloved of historians. Supposed by whom? I shall not offer a lengthy justification of this assertion (though it certainly would be possible to give ample, albeit non-quantitative, evidence of how the ‘myth of the myth’ has been propagated). I am less concerned with self-interested political assertions — that is, the regime’s own declarations of its pervasive myth, which are legion — than with supposedly objective scholarly evaluations. Thus, Ilene O’Malley, a historian, argues that, in the years following the Revolution, Mexico underwent ‘a tremendous subjective change of national consciousness’ and that the ‘cult of the Revolution’ involved profound mystification, even false consciousness; all of which was made possible by ‘the public’s ideological

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7 Thomas Benjamin, La Revolución: Mexico’s Great Revolution as Memory, Myth, and History (Austin, 2000), 33. The present article owes a lot to this book.

8 Debates concerning the Mexican Revolution, which in the past often centred on class analyses (was the Revolution a ‘bourgeois’ revolution, a ‘peasant war’, both, or neither?) have now shifted to a more state-centred approach: did the Revolution spawn a strong or weak state, and were the revolutionary policies enacted during the 1920s and 1930s the product of ‘bottom-up’ popular pressure or ‘top-down’ state imposition?

ignorance’. A very reputable political scientist, drawing on survey data of the 1960s and 1970s, states that ‘the mythification of the Mexican Revolution is an omnipresent and indisputable fact’ of Mexican political life. It would not be difficult to roll out a long carpet of comparable quotations: one such quotation, which has the merit of both sound provenance and pithiness, states that ‘we, the Mexicans have two deities: Our Lady the Virgin of Guadalupe and our Lady the Mexican Revolution’. The myth of the Revolution is thus elevated alongside Mexico’s most ancient, influential and pervasive religious cult. So, even if readers of this article dispute the accuracy and interpretation of the empirical data, or question the logic and consistency of the argument, they will, I think, find it difficult to query the significance of the topic — the myth of the Mexican Revolution — or to complain that the argument presented here, whether right or wrong, is trivially self-evident.

There is one final preliminary observation which should be made. It is sometimes essential to begin a historical analysis with a careful conceptual introduction — a ‘naming of parts’. As the Chinese proverb says, ‘the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names’. However, semantic disquisitions are sometimes superfluous and pedantic. In this case, a learned summation of ‘mythistory’ and theories of myths seems to me to fall into the second category. Much of what is written about myths concerns either cosmic and religious beliefs or literary idioms. Some of it, notably the mystical psychobabble of Mircea Eliade, is obscure and, certainly for my purposes, irrelevant. So, if the

14 Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton, 1991). Anthropological studies of myth (notably those of Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss) may be more persuasive, but their relevance to the study of modern political myth is moot: see Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London, 1972), 48–60; and, of course, the anthropologists themselves are seriously divided over the character and
reader of this article expects to encounter maieutics, metapsychoanalysis or the great Cosmic Egg, they will be disappointed.15 Of course, perfectly rational analysts have hypothesized that the Mexican Revolution, like the French or the Russian, developed a kind of ‘secular religion’.16 In respect of ritual, they may be right — that is, secular ritual sometimes emulated or parodied religious ritual.17 However, ritualistic mimesis is one thing (which may in turn derive from cultural inertia or even a kind of situational logic: there are only so many ways to gather large groups of people together and, literally and/or metaphorically, get them ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’),18 when, on the other hand, it comes to the ideas and expectations which are bound up in myths, the distinction between secular and religious myths is striking and should be stressed. Whatever may have been true of Marxist/Soviet teleology or of its Nazi counterpart — and, without being an expert, I think the parallels are easily exaggerated and misconceived — the ‘myth’ of the Mexican Revolution was resolutely secular, anticlerical and this-worldly.19 It did not

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(continues on p. 228)
claim universal validity and it was not designed for export. Its inspiration was national-historical, as I shall suggest; there were no great intellectual founding fathers, no Mexican *philosophes*, no Mexican Marx and Engels. And it was not (*pace* some historians) ‘Utopian’ in any real sense.

However, it is quite correct to discern a political — secular, this-worldly, mobilizing — ‘myth’ arising out of the Revolution and playing some role in the legitimization of the revolutionary regime (how big a role is another question I shall address). For my purposes, the ‘myth’ of the Revolution includes exemplary policies — such as land and labour reform, *indigenismo*, education and economic nationalism: taken together, these could be said to constitute the ‘project’ of the Revolution — as well as a broader and more diffuse set of images, icons, heroes, stories, slogans, songs and anniversaries. Needless to say, these diverse representations require effective media, deployed by suitable organizations, for their diffusion: books, newspapers, film, radio, murals, monuments, public buildings, schools, parties, trade unions and ejidos (agrarian reform communities). In other words, memes need carriers (something which idealist historians tend to overlook). The ‘project’ of the Revolution is, we could say, the hard political kernel of the process; the ‘myth’ consists of the fleshy pulp which surrounds it, and which makes it altogether more tasty and appealing. The ‘myth’ of the Mexican Revolution therefore fits tolerably well within the broad definition of ‘political myth’: it offers a kind of story (today we might prefer ‘narrative’; some would even favour ‘metanarrative’); that story has an emotive

modern political myths . . . fall into this category’, including, I would stress, that of the Mexican Revolution.

20 Frank Tannenbaum, *La paz por la Revolución* (1938; Mexico City, 2003), 135–6.
22 The list of ‘exemplary policies’ may vary somewhat from scholar to scholar, but there is substantial overlap and, hence, consensus: compare Ramón Reséndiz García, ‘Del nacimiento y muerte del mito político llamado Revolución Mexicana’, in *Estudios sociológicos*, xxiii (2005), 146–52, and Alan Knight, ‘The Ideology of the Mexican Revolution, 1910–40’, *Estudios interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, viii (1997). There are a few dissenting outliers: for example, the list of fourteen tenets of the ‘Revolutionary Creed’ compiled by Frank Brandenburg and listed by Gawronski, ‘Revolution Is Dead’, 376–7, which contains some odd elements (such as ‘economic integration’ and ‘financial stability’).
past, with implications for the present and future; it is not, of course, literally ‘true’, nor is its importance necessarily proportional to its truth content; but it needs to be believed (hence truth content may be crucial, especially if we do not regard people as gullible fools);\(^{23}\) and it has a key function, that of mobilizing support and, in some measure, generating legitimacy.\(^{24}\)

II

Since myths, especially political myths, usually involve stories, I begin the analysis by locating the Revolution within the broad sweep of Mexican history. Revolutions are supposed to usher in major structural change in society, carrying with them a sharp break with — and repudiation of — the past.\(^{25}\) The French Revolution, the conceptual template for so many later models, was powered by a ‘will to break with the past’, involving not just a ‘deluge of words’, but also the very ‘invention of ideology’ and the ‘instant creation of the new community’.\(^{26}\) Prescriptive arguments, based on historical precedent, were the privilege of conservatives.\(^{27}\) Thus, ‘the chief accomplishment of the French Revolution was the institution of a dramatically new political culture’.\(^{28}\) Not all revolutions (conventionally defined) have displayed quite this character. Those which preceded the French Revolution — the English and American revolutions — accommodated history, either drawing inspiration from the past (the Norman yoke, the rights of freeborn Englishmen),\(^{29}\) or allowing for more incremental, linear change (the survival, for example, of

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\(^{23}\) Cf. O’Malley’s low opinion of Mexican credulousness (see n. 10 above). As Tudor, *Political Myth*, 123, observes: ‘if a myth is to be a practical argument, the chief condition for its success is that it be understood as a true narrative of events. If it is regarded as a pack of lies, it may well provide entertainment, but it will fail as an explanation and will lack prescriptive force’; see also Flood, ‘Political Myth’, i, 298. On the narrative aspect of myth, see Tudor, *Political Myth*, 27; Segal, *Myth*, 4–5, 84–5.

\(^{24}\) Tudor, *Political Myth*, 91, noting how revolutionary ‘foundation myths’ (linked, for example, to 1776 or 1917) come to perform a conservative legitimizing function.

\(^{25}\) Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, 1979), 4, 33.


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 28–9.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 15.

bicameral legislatures in the majority of the Thirteen Colonies after independence). Since 1789, however, the notion of a radical ideological and historical break has become well entrenched, in the minds of both students and practitioners of revolution. Again, there may be qualified exceptions: in the 1930s, Stalin appropriated older notions of ‘national sentiment and patriotism . . . with the return of Russian history to the school curriculum’. But this was a highly selective appropriation of a suitably remote history; what is more, it represented a derogation of an earlier, purer and more radical Bolshevik rejection of the recent tsarist past; perhaps it was even emblematic of a Stalinist Thermidor.

Mexico, however, is an odd case — in this, as in a good deal else. The Revolution of 1910 certainly ushered in a period of profound conflict, leading to major structural changes in Mexican society. In this sense it was certainly a revolution. But repudiation of the past was highly qualified, at times minimal. There was no ‘invention of ideology’, no great cultural watershed. The Revolution began, as Arnaldo Córdova notes, with ‘a burning defence of the past’ — chiefly, of the liberal-patriotic past associated with Benito Juárez and his generation. And after 1920, as the new revolutionary state consolidated and embarked on substantial reform, which, in turn, built on the de facto changes wrought by the armed revolution, so the — positive,

33 I make this point because some revisionist historians have questioned whether it was a ‘proper’ revolution at all: see Alan Knight, ‘The Mexican Revolution: Bourgeois? Nationalist? Or Just a “Great Rebellion”?’, *Bull. Latin Amer. Research*, iv (1985).
34 Arnaldo Córdova, *La ideología de la Revolución Mexicana: la formación del nuevo régimen* (Mexico City, 1973), 87. Marx, too, had noted how, ‘just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things’, revolutionaries ‘anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured guise’: Tudor, *Political Myth*, 132.
35 I would stress the importance of the informal, unplanned and unforeseen changes which the Revolution brought about — in terms of economic organization, spatial and social mobility, demography, and class and ethnic attitudes — as against the formal, planned legislation which tends to dominate a good deal of traditional history (legislation which, it should be added, was often very imperfectly
inspirational — invocation of the past continued. As a perceptive American journalist noted in the 1920s:

the contemporary Revolution is the culmination of an entire past . . . It is a truism that every nation is a derivative of its past. But in other countries the present has frequently so far distanced its remote past that much of it has only an attenuated and academic relation to contemporary events. The reverse is true in Mexico. Continuity is the marrow of Mexican history beneath changing surface events. 36

And as another, somewhat less perceptive, American journalist concurred some sixty years later: ‘the past remains alive in the Mexican soul . . . history, revised and adjusted to suit contemporary needs, is therefore mobilized to maintain the cohesion of modern society’. 37

So how do we arrive at the paradox of a genuinely revolutionary state and society which harped on about its pre-revolutionary history? Was this mere discursive camouflage? Or quasi-Stalinist backsliding? And, if we stretch the analysis, rather ambitiously and necessarily superficially, beyond the watersheds of c.1940 and c.1982, 38 what was the legacy of this odd relationship between past and present in twentieth-century Mexico?

The revolutionaries of 1910, as they confronted and overthrew Porfirio Díaz’s thirty-five-year-old developmental dictatorship, regularly invoked the past. Revolution was justified less as a leap into an unknown future, than as a restoration of a preferred status quo ante (in which respect, therefore, the Mexican Revolution resembled the English Revolution rather than the French, which is unfortunate for historians who insist on exporting the French metanarrative to Mexico). 39


38 These are rough dates: 1940 conventionally marks the end of the Cárdenas administration, hence the end of the more radical phase of the Revolution; 1982 signals the onset of the debt crisis and the definitive end of the Mexican ‘economic miracle’, based on import substitution industrialization; however, the miracle had been running out of steam for some time (assuming miracles run on steam).
39 See François-Xavier Guerra, *Le Mexique: de l’Ancien Régime à la Révolution*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1985), a study whose many merits are not wholly eclipsed by the dogged application of the French metanarrative to a country whose monarchical ancien régime had ended in 1821. Guerra’s more recent work has focused on the period of independence (c.1800–c.1830), where his preferred model is much more appropriate. See Alan Knight, ‘La Revolución mexicana de François-Xavier Guerra: coincidencias y (cont. on p. 232)
and his respectable, literate, largely urban liberals harked back to Benito Juárez and the generation of La Reforma, who had defeated the conservatives, the French and their imperial creature Maximilian, thus saving the republic and the liberal constitution of 1857. The Maderistas sought not to subvert, but to make reality of that constitution (which Díaz had systematically ignored and traduced). Had they succeeded, they would have brought about a significant political reform, involving free elections and civil rights (analogous, perhaps, to the achievement of the Argentine Radicals after 1916), but they would not have engineered a social revolution.

The fact that a social revolution — certainly a major social upheaval — occurred derived from other causes, especially the tensions which had accumulated in the Mexican countryside during Díaz’s thirty-five years of ‘order and progress’ dictatorship. In particular, the central state had imposed its capricious authority on rural society; and agrarian Mexico had undergone rapid commercialization, involving the expansion of haciendas (large estates) and the expropriation of peasant landholdings. The victims now demanded a reversal of Porfirian policies of political centralization and agrarian commercialization. Such demands posed a more radical — social, economic, sometimes ethnic — challenge to the Porfirian status quo than that posed by Madero’s political liberals. However, there was a measure of common ground, rooted in history, which went beyond mere expedience (‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’). Popular rural rebels often shared with their urban middle-class allies a respect for Mexico’s liberal heritage: they favoured free elections and municipal freedom (both as ends in themselves and as means to protect peasant landholdings); they revered the figure of Juárez and his fellow liberals (even the young Porfirio Díaz figured in this liberal pantheon); and they conceived of liberalism as a popular and patriotic movement which embodied enduring Mexican values — defence of the patria, representation of the people and affirmation of local autonomy. Indeed, the capacious umbrella

(n. 39 cont.)

discrepancias’, in Elisa Cárdenas Ayala and Annick Lempérière (eds.), _Una ausencia que convoca: homenaje a François-Xavier Guerra_ (Guadalajara, 2007).

40 What follows is a very brief, somewhat ‘traditional’, non-revisionist (some would say ‘post-revisionist’) outline. For a fuller version, see Knight, _Mexican Revolution_, i, ch. 3.
of patriotic liberalism spread even wider, sheltering also the working-class radicals who rallied to the Partido Liberal Mexicano after 1906.\(^{41}\) Popular liberalism embodied some serious contradictions: it glossed over Juárez’s palpable failings and abuses;\(^ {42}\) and it made possible, for the time being, a popular alliance with elite liberals whose socio-economic interests were substantially different. But its force often derived less from any careful, cost–benefit analysis (still less, from any minute examination of the historical record of Juarismo), than from local and family loyalties: thus, José Zapata had led local forces in the final successful campaigns against the French and imperialists in the Villa de Ayala region of Morelos, where, fifty years later, his great-nephew Emiliano would captain the agrarian revolution of the south.\(^ {43}\) Similar liberal lineages, which would later transmute into revolutionary activism, were to be found in other regions, such as Michoacán or the Huasteca.\(^ {44}\)

Patriotic liberalism could thus rally a diverse range of Mexican groups and classes. In their eyes, Díaz was at fault chiefly for reneging on his own early popular liberalism. Hence it was logical for them to hark back to the Restored Republic and early Porfiriato (when Díaz himself had campaigned under the slogan ‘the Constitution of 1867 and electoral freedom’)\(^ {45}\) and, even further, to the glorious days of the Reforma and the War of the French Intervention, when Díaz had been a dashing and successful young officer at the victorious Battle of Puebla (5 May


\(^{43}\) John Womack Jr, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York, 1968), 8–9. The exact relationship is unclear; José Zapata was probably Emiliano’s great-uncle. ‘In any case’, Womack observes, ‘his [José’s] part in village history served to establish Zapata as an honored name there’: *ibid.*, 9.


The Revolution of 1910 could therefore be depicted as a re-run and re-affirmation of the Reforma, which had brought the Liberals to power in the 1850s. If a European parallel is sought, it would clearly not be Bolshevism, but something like a popular-democratic opposition to Italian Fascism premised on the patriotic ideals of the Risorgimento.

Furthermore, the prescriptive resort to history did not stop there. If the Revolution reprised the Reforma, both harked back to the Revolution of Independence (1810–21), which had ended Spanish colonial rule and established Mexico as a sovereign nation state: as a boy, in that notably bellicose year 1812, Zapata’s maternal grandfather, José Salazar, had sneaked through the Spanish lines at the siege of Cuautla, bringing the embattled patriot garrison those essentials of Mexican warfare: ‘tortillas, salt, liquor and gunpowder’. Three cumulative popular-patriotic waves thus carried Mexico from colony (1810–21) to consolidated liberal republic (1857–67) to Revolution (1910–17).

If the liberal-patriotic umbrella was capacious, there were still plenty of people left outside: the Porfirian regime (1876–1911) and its creatures, notably the army and officialdom (who had betrayed popular liberalism in order to forge an ‘order-and-progress dictatorship’); its time-serving allies (landlords and, to a degree, foreign interests); and, a largely separate but very numerous constituency, political Catholics, who had never been wholly reconciled to the Porfirian regime, who repudiated the memory of the anticlerical Juárez, who wished the Reform had never happened and who, in some cases, regretted that the stable, God-fearing colony had given way to the chaotic, anticlerical republic. Thus, just as the revolutionaries saw the Revolution of 1910 as the third wave in a progressive, patriotic sequence

46 Womack, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution, 7.
47 Benjamin, La Revolución, 43, 52. Javier Garciadiego, ‘Nuevas disputas por la historia’, Nexos, cclxxv (2001), 34, states that ‘the Mexican Revolution began to be seen — thanks to Jesús Reyes Heroles — as the third phase in the country’s formative experience, along with the Reform and Independence’; which is right in respect of Reyes Heroles’s grand vision, but wrong in attributing the idea to Reyes Heroles himself: it is much older.
48 By ‘political Catholics’, a term I shall use recurrently, I mean Mexicans whose politics were premised on their Catholicism, especially (but not solely) at times of Church–State conflict. Obviously, Mexicans of many political complexions — liberal, socialist, even Marxist — were also Catholics; but ‘political Catholics’ took their cue from the Church, and the Church was often quick to provide such cues.
(1810, 1854, 1910), so their clerical Catholic enemies regarded it as a final fall from grace, compounding the errors of independence and the Reforma. Indeed, the enduring polemic between clerical Catholics and Jacobin liberals/revolutionaries opened the door to a fourth, even older, historical bifurcation: the Spanish Conquest of 1519–21, which, according to the clerical Catholic camp, replaced monstrous paganism with the true faith, or, according to (some of) their liberal/revolutionary rivals, inaugurated a regime of benighted superstition on the ruins of once-great Indian civilizations.49

However, the bonds of ideology and expedience which united the loose revolutionary alliance of 1910 soon frayed. Madero’s winning coalition of 1910–11 came apart during 1911–13; Carranza’s reconstituted coalition (1913–14) experienced a similar fate in 1914–15, leading to a major intra-revolutionary civil war (the so-called ‘War of the Winners’). A common attachment to patriotic liberalism could not counteract the centrifugal forces of class, regional and clientelist loyalties. Zapata’s agrarian revolutionaries, eager for a swift land reform, spurned Madero and Carranza, as did serrano (‘highland’) rebels, who had no desire to replace the centralizing Porfírian state with an equally centralizing revolutionary one (they were, in so many words, resisting the classic Tocquevillean sequence of revolution).50 Factional/clientelist affiliations, too, prised apart the grand national coalitions; while, at the grass roots, the local loyalties which had often prompted popular mobilization easily degenerated into parochial squabbles: San Cristóbal against Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Juchitán...

49 I introduce this fourth ‘bifurcation’ with a caveat: while the Independence > Reforma > Revolution sequence tended to divide liberals and conservatives fairly consistently, the Conquest is a more ambiguous marker — chiefly because nineteenth-century liberals, even if they dabbled in early indigenismo, nevertheless admired European culture, were often Catholics and, like most elites of the time, entertained racist ideas; they were therefore leery of seeming to endorse the Aztecs. It was not until the twentieth century — after the Revolution — that a more full-blooded indigenismo flourished, leading to a blanket condemnation of both Conquest and Colony, and a romantically uncritical revalorization of pre-Conquest culture, a classic example being the case of Cuauhtémoc’s bones: see Paul Gillingham, ‘The Emperor of Ixcateopan: Fraud, Nationalism and Memory in Modern Mexico’, Jl Latin Amer. Studies, xxxvii (2005).

against Tehuantepec, Xalatlaco against Santiago Tianguistenco, and Ixtepeji — a particularly belligerent community in the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca — against Ixtlán, Lachatao, Latuvi, San Miguel del Río, Amatlán, Atepec, Calpulalpan, Analco, San Juan Chicomezúchil and Tlalixtac de Cabrera.51

As the Revolution progressed, therefore, class, regional and clientelist motivations often tended to trump ideological attachments. It did not matter that Carranza and Zapata alike revered Juárez; or that the young Cárdenas shared the same liberal-patriotic upbringing as many of his Villista enemies. Meanwhile, the main historico-ideological division — that which set apart anticlerical liberals and clerical Catholics — was initially (1910–13) marginal; and, even as it became more salient after 1913, its chief consequence was to demarcate anticlerical revolutionaries (Calles, Diéguez, Villareal) from the mass of conservative Catholics who, while bitterly hostile to the Revolution, had no hope or means of contesting for national power. Although the revolutionaries adopted different official stances towards the Church (most being either hostile or indifferent), the clerical question was not usually a crucial determinant of intra-revolutionary loyalties, still less of the Revolution’s final outcome.52 It would, however, become a crucial issue in the 1920s, when the revolutionary government, now ensconced in power, enacted radical anticlerical — and anti-religious — measures, provoking a serious Catholic (‘Cristero’) rebellion in 1926–9.

The final triumph of Obregón, Carranza and the Constitutionlists after 1915 did not therefore mark a decisive ideological break. Had the Villistas won, as they nearly did, the result

51 Thomas Benjamin, *A Rich Land, a Poor People: Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas* (Albuquerque, 1989), 106–10; Miguel Covarrubias, *El sur de México* (Mexico City, 1980), 205–8, 287; Soledad González Montes and Alejandro Patiño Díaz, *Memoria campesina: la historia de Xalatlaco contada por su gente* (Toluca, 1994), 87–8; Michael Kearney, *Los vientos de Ixtepeji: concepción del mundo y estructura social de un pueblo zapoteco* (Mexico City, 1971), 58. It would be easy to extend this list of local ‘dyadic rivalries’. 52 That is to say, the decision to support Villa or Zapata as against Carranza or Obregón was not likely to hinge upon the clerical question. It is true that Carranza and Obregón tended to be more systematically anticlerical, which probably affected public opinion more broadly (political Catholics were fonder of — or, at least, less hostile towards — Villa, for example); but they were not part of the revolutionary camp, and therefore could not significantly affect the outcome of the ‘War of the Winners’, which was decided by rival revolutionary armies on the battlefield: Knight, *Mexican Revolution*, ii, 263–303.
would have been — in broad ideological terms — much the same.\textsuperscript{53} Mexico would still have emerged from the Revolution with a liberal-republican constitution, now incorporating some more radical social provisions: the protection of labour, the promotion of agrarian reform, the commitment to secular education. To put it crudely, the discursive content of the Mexican Revolution would have been much the same; the chief difference concerned the institutional make-up of the state, which, as a result of the Obregón/Carranza victory, promised to be more structured, centralized, incipiently bureaucratic and — to use an ugly but useful term — ‘massified’. During the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, the state consolidated itself on the basis of new institutions: the labour unions and confederations; the federal school system and the Ministry of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública; SEP); the ejido (the agrarian reform community); and, after 1929, the official party (PNR, later PRM during 1938–46, then PRI from 1946). These were decisive changes, largely lacking Porfirian precedent, and constitutive of a politico-social revolution. However, if we switch the focus from institutions to ideology or discourse, innovation is much less obvious. In discursive/ideological terms, the Revolution — compared with its French counterpart — displays striking continuity, even conservatism; hence the unsuitability of the French revolutionary model.

III

Analysis of this discursive continuity demands some rough periodization. So far, I have set the scene by briefly describing the decade of armed conflict, 1910–20. Three subsequent periods can be identified (according to the relevant politico-social criteria).\textsuperscript{54} Plagiarizing Meso-American archaeology, I shall refer

\textsuperscript{53} Again, this is my view, but it is by no means mainstream opinion: Alan Knight, ‘The Mexican Revolution: Five Counter-Factuals’, in Jaime Bailón Corres, Carlos Martínez Assad and Pablo Serrano Álvarez (eds.), El siglo de la Revolución Mexicana, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 2000), i, 52–8.

\textsuperscript{54} Unless we believe that history advances in lockstep, with politics, the economy, demography, foreign relations, science, culture etc. all changing synchronically (a pretty far-fetched belief), then periodization will obviously depend on the processes being periodized; in this case, I am focusing on political and social trends (or, we could say, ‘state and society’). These trends are bound up with — but do not faithfully reflect — economic and demographic transformations; ‘cultural’ history, in the traditional sense of the history of art, literature, music, is yet more detached.
to these as the ‘formative’, ‘classic’ and ‘post-classic’ periods. First, the ‘formative’ period, which is my chief focus, comprised some twenty years of revolutionary reconstruction and reform, 1920–40, when the generation which had come to power during the armed revolution consolidated power, created the official party (1929), implemented some of the social goals of the Revolution and strove to create a hegemonic revolutionary myth. Second, there ensued a longer period, c.1940–c.1982, the ‘classic’ period, when two successive generations, gathered under the broad banner of the PRI, inherited and enjoyed a secure lien on power, shifted the thrust of policy away from social reform, but sustained the now ostensibly hegemonic myth of the Revolution, albeit in a significantly changing context. A third and final period, the ‘post-classic’, covers roughly the last twenty-five years, when a fourth, ‘neo-liberal’ and technocratic, generation came to power, opted for yet another national project and finally ditched — or had wrested from them — the myth which had been forged in the 1920s and 1930s, and triumphantly brandished from the 1940s to the 1970s. They were the last generation of the ruling PRI, since — perhaps because of its mythic/discursive apostasy? — the party dramatically lost power in 2000, which year could be seen, if we pursue the Meso-American analogy relentlessly, as the counterpart of the Spanish Conquest of 1519, which ended the post-classic and ushered in something radically new. Indeed, as I note in conclusion, although President Fox, the surprise victor in 2000, was no Hernán Cortés, he helped topple the shaky old regime and, like Cortés, he seems to have believed that he had God on his side when he did so.

The Formative Period, 1920–1940

It proved easier for the infant revolutionary regime of the 1920s to create institutions than ideas. Government fiat could bring new institutions into being: the agrarian reform community, the ejido; the federal school system; the Ministry of Education (1921); the Bank of Mexico (1925); the National Irrigation Commission (1926); the official party, the PNR (1929); the Six Year Plan (1934); and the state oil company, PEMEX (1938). Of course, the success of such ventures depended a great deal on the engagement of civil society. Demands for agrarian reform varied from place to place, and from time to time: success — that is, rapid and
effective reform — was most apparent where and when official policy conspired with ‘bottom-up’ activism. The same was true of federal schools: top-down and bottom-up pressures varied. On the left bank of the Yaqui Valley the school became the centre of community activism; in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, it was viewed with greater suspicion.\(^{55}\) A similar dialectic affected labour mobilization. The first dominant labour confederation, the CROM (Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana, 1918), drew on previous — lapsed or lapsing — anarcho-syndicalist leaders; but the state acted as midwife and wet nurse, hence the prodigious growth of the infant CROM depended a great deal on official feeding. The same was true of the CROM’s successor, the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores de México) in the 1930s.

When it came to creating and disseminating the myth of the Revolution, however, things moved more slowly. Indeed, it is striking how slowly the regime set about securing its discursive moorings. No revolutionary school textbooks were devised during the 1920s; José Vasconcelos, the first minister of education (1921–4), was happy to reprint Justo Sierra’s *History of Mexico*; and the expanding federal school system relied on old Porfirian texts and old Porfirian teachers.\(^{56}\) The commemoration of revolutionary anniversaries was largely the work of private citizens and informal associations.\(^{57}\) Statues — which the Díaz regime had delighted in erecting, especially in the capital — were conspicuous by their absence. President Obregón, assassinated in 1928, got an official mausoleum in 1935 (so he had to wait seven years); but there was no Zapata statue until 1932 (thirteen years), and no monument to Carranza until 1936 (sixteen years).\(^{58}\) And what, readers may ask, of the famous murals of the Mexican Revolution? The first official post-revolutionary mural, Roberto Montenegro’s *Dance of the Hours* (1921), ‘portrayed elegant ladies dancing around an armoured knight leaning against a


\(^{57}\) Benjamin, *La Revolución*, 72.

Persian tree of life’, the whole captioned by a quotation from Goethe.\footnote{Vaughan, *State, Education, and Social Class*, 259.} Not much socialist realism there. Furthermore, when, a couple of years later, the more celebrated muralists (Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros) started producing their socially didactic wall-scapes, the reaction was often hostile: their initial patron, education minister Vasconcelos, did not like them, the press slated them and university students defaced them, earning the commendation of their rector for doing so.\footnote{Ibid., 261–2.} One newspaper denounced art — Orozco’s, in this case — which reduced Mexicans to ‘peons, Indians [and] labourers — the dregs of society’.\footnote{Ibid., 262.} The government’s disquiet was hardly surprising, given that the muralists were (often) using the walls of public buildings to paint graphic representations of government graft and corruption.\footnote{Gruening, *Mexico and its Heritage*, 641.} This may have been art in the service of revolution, but it was hardly art in the service of the revolutionary government.

There were several reasons for this apparent failure of the regime to construct a convincing myth. (Some of these reasons have been suggested already.) First, no revolutionary consensus existed in the 1920s. As a protracted and bloody armed movement (1910–20), the Mexican Revolution had not been the work of a coherent, centralized ‘vanguard party’. The ‘hegemonic’ PNR/PRM/PRI came into existence nineteen years after the Revolution began, and served to unite an existing revolutionary coalition. Thus, the Soviet and Chinese pattern — whereby a vanguard party battled its way to power, thereafter imposing its vision on state and society — was quite different. To the (hypothetical) questions ‘what does the Revolution mean?’ and ‘what is its historical significance?’, different people in the 1920s would have given very different answers. Schematically, and a little imaginatively, the historian might put these words in the respondents’ mouths, or these thoughts into their heads.

First, members of the revolutionary elite had a vested interest in maintaining themselves in power (their Machiavellian will-to-power has been rightly stressed by recent scholarship).\footnote{Paul Friedrich, *The Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Anthrohistorical Method* (Austin, 1986), addresses a local agrarista elite, but the collective portrait has relevance for the Sonoran national regime too.}
In pursuit of this goal — which, with hindsight, looks much easier than it really was — the elite could deploy a range of methods, three of which were crucial: coercion, clientelism and social reform. But these were pragmatic means; and the ideology underpinning government was vague and eclectic. The revolutionaries set themselves apart from ‘Reaction’ — a sort of reified, all-purpose bogeyman — which stood in the way of the ‘Revolution’ (also reified). The most egregious embodiment of ‘Reaction’ was not Díaz (who stirred somewhat contradictory emotions), but Victoriano Huerta, the military usurper who took power in 1913, killing Madero and inaugurating an eighteen-month military dictatorship. Most revolutionaries could agree that Huerta was, in the terminology of Sellar and Yeatman, a thoroughly Bad Thing: a jackal, a Judas, even a ‘Zapotec Caligula’.

Beyond that point of limited agreement there was loose consensus only regarding the Revolution’s historical niche: it did not subvert, so much as consummate, Mexico’s past. As I have noted, the Revolution was readily slotted into a teleological sequence: Independence > Reforma > Revolution, which had the advantage of appropriating for the Revolution the still-strong tradition of patriotic liberalism. Prescription counted for more than innovation. Though loose, this was by no means an all-embracing consensus: a large chunk of the Mexican population, political Catholics in particular, remained beyond the pale. As anticlericalism gathered strength, culminating in the Calles presidency (1924–8), and provoking the great Catholic rebellion, the Cristiada (1926–9), so the Catholic versus anticlerical, Cristero versus Callista, ‘reactionary’ versus revolutionary dichotomy

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64 By ‘clientelism’ I mean the discretionary distribution of rewards to a favoured group, by a personal leader (caudillo or cacique), in return for support, while ‘social reform’ connotes a broader, more disinterested, even ‘universal’ distribution of benefits, according to defined principles, rather than discretionary authority. Bribery and nepotism are extreme forms of clientelism. Needless to say, the boundaries between the two phenomena are blurred: agrarian and labour reform obeyed broad principles, which carried weight; but their implementation often involved discretionary authority and clientelist bias. Identifying and explaining these related phenomena are among the chief tasks of the historian of the revolutionary state.

65 Which was unfair on the Zapotecos (Huerta being a native of Jalisco, where there were no Zapotecos) and possibly even unfair on Caligua. The epithets are those of Francisco Padilla González, quoted in Benjamin, La Revolución, 61. On the conceptual framework, see W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, 1066 and All That (London, 1930).
came to dominate Mexican politics, especially in the centre-west of the country, where the war raged most fiercely. Furthermore, although the Cristero War was ended by a messy compromise — the arreglos (‘arrangements’) of 1929 — it was, in a sense, renewed in the 1930s, albeit in a less bloody form. The ‘Second Cristiada’ could not compare with the first in terms of scope and casualties; but, much more significantly, Church and State now squared up to each other in the metaphorical trenches of civil society, especially the schools. With the introduction of more stridently anticlerical — and, soon, ‘socialist’ — education in the schools; and the growing confrontation between, on the one hand, radical, sometimes marxisant, ‘popular-frontist’ ideas and policies, and, on the other, rival policies and ideas couched in conservative-clerical and fascist guise, Mexican politics acquired a distinctly Manichaean dimension in addition to its older Machiavellian realpolitik.

The logic of Manichaean politics was that ideas mattered. Calles, president in 1924–8 and jefe máximo (‘big boss’) in 1928–34, saw Mexican history in somewhat apocalyptic terms: it involved a century-long struggle between a benighted clergy, the gift of gachupín colonialism, and progressive forces, now represented by the revolutionary state. The state, in Calles’s memorable words, had to take possession of the minds of Mexicans, especially of the young. As in the United States of the 1920s, questions of nationalism, pedagogy, religion and

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67 Calles shared many of the ideas common to the revolutionary elite of the time, especially the Sonoran leadership. But he was, I think, crucial in three respects, which set him somewhat apart from the more pragmatic, cynical Obregón. First, he took power at a time when the revolutionary state, having survived the difficult years 1920–4, was beginning to flex its muscles, especially in opposition to its perceived enemies (the Church, the oil companies). Second, as his rich personal archive shows, he was a cerebral president, keenly interested in both grand systems and international examples, hence disposed to see politics in macro-systemic terms. Third, he had a ruthless, authoritarian, even vindictive streak, perhaps linked to his personal origins (an illegitimate child, he was spurned by his well-to-do father and brought up by an aunt): see Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power. A History of Modern Mexico, 1810–1996*, trans. Hank Heifetz (New York, 1997), 405–6, 412 ff. Jürgen Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, 2007), offers a recent synopsis. Gachupín is the popular derogatory term for ‘Spaniard’.

moral reformation were paramount (in part because the economic model — market capitalism — was not, as yet, open to serious question). After Vasconcelos, education — indoctrination for some — acquired a more militant, practical and prescriptive edge. Vasconcelos, the poet-philosopher and first post-revolutionary education minister (1921–4), had espoused a vague, idealistic, classicism: give the peasants Plato and Goethe and they would lift their eyes beyond their miserable milpas. He objected to Rivera’s stolid Indians and advocated images of Homeric or Quixotic inspiration. But Vasconcelos’s successors were both more pragmatic and more ruthless. They favoured a practical pedagogy which would make Mexicans more loyal, patriotic, hard-working, secular and — by the 1930s, at least — class-conscious. The school therefore became an engine of acculturation and political mobilization; and the school curriculum mirrored the nationalist and class-conscious concerns of the regime. Cosmopolitan classicism gave way to earthy Mexican social realism. Native artisanry and folklore, which had been boosted by amateur (including North American) enthusiasts in the 1920s, now received official sponsorship. For the first time, a reified vision of the Revolution was systematically formulated and disseminated.

It is worth stressing that this did not occur until some twenty years after the initial outbreak of the armed revolution in 1910. The myth was a long time coming. In part, as I have just suggested, it was devised to counter the sharp threat of clerical reaction. (Calles had confidently assumed that the Catholic Church could be beaten into submission and that popular Catholicism would wilt in the bright light of revolutionary secularism: he was...
wrong on both counts, especially the second.) However, other factors determined this belated timetable.

First, the revolutionary elites faced the major problem that the armed revolution had been a bitter internecine struggle, producing winners and losers. Especially in the later years of the war (1914–20), the winners and losers alike were to be found in the broad revolutionary camp. If the insurrections against Díaz (1910–11) and Huerta (1913–14) had displayed a clear political, even class, logic, pitting popular rebels against conservative/authoritarian regimes, the final big bout of civil war — the ‘War of the Winners’ and its aftermath (1914 onwards) — was an intra-revolutionary struggle. A quick roll-call of the revolutionary dead illustrates the difficulty of achieving an easy consensus: Madero, angrily repudiated by Zapata in 1911, and murdered by Huerta in 1913, while many of his erstwhile supporters stayed silent; Zapata, betrayed and killed in classic ‘bandit’ fashion by the minions of Carranza in 1919;72 Carranza, slain by traitorous allies, who went over to Obregón, in 1920;73 Villa, gunned down in the streets of Parral by hit men hired (almost certainly) by Obregón’s government, in 1923;74 a clutch of Carrancistas killed or exiled at the time of the De la Huerta revolt in 1923–4.75 The only magnicidio (high-level assassination) that, it could be said, obeyed any grand political logic was the killing of Obregón by a Catholic fanatic in 1928; except that León Toral should have gunned down the arch-clerophobe and comecuras (‘priest-eater’) President Calles, rather than the more pragmatic president-elect Obregón. But then we can hardly count on

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72 On (pre- and post-1919) Zapatista invective against Carranza, see Benjamin, La Revolución, 53–4; O’Malley, Myth of the Revolution, 46; see also n. 78 below. The Carrancistas allegedly responsible for the killing were not particularly apologetic: Roger Bartra, Blood, Ink and Culture: Miseries and Splendors of the Post-Mexican Condition, trans. Mark Alan Healey (Durham, NC, 2002), 98.

73 Hence the Carranza family’s brusque refusal of a pension offered by the Obregón government, a refusal signed ‘your loyal enemies’: Benjamin, La Revolución, 70; see also Alfonso Taracena, La revolución desvirtuada, iv, Año 1936 (Mexico City, 1967), 60–1, 68–9.


75 Benjamin, La Revolución, 69–70. The list of fratricidal victims was so long and distinguished that, when Villa’s name was finally added to the roster of heroes — Madero, Zapata, Carranza — whose gilt names graced the walls of the national legislature, one deputy ‘likened the Chamber to the temple of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli, in the sense that sacrificers and sacrificial victims were linked together’: Katz, Life and Times of Pancho Villa, 791.
fanatical assassins to do their research properly and reach rational conclusions.

Thereafter, *magnicidios* stopped, at least until the 1990s.\(^76\) Top-level conflicts — for example, President Cádernas versus *jefe máximo* Calles in 1934–6 — were resolved more peacefully and decorously (which no doubt helped the contemporaneous formulation of a more consensual myth). During and even beyond the 1920s, however, revolutionary leaders were often too acutely conscious of their personal, factional and clientelist loyalties to buy into a common, consensual myth of the Revolution. And leaders and factions could usually count on some pet historians — factional organic intellectuals, it could be said — who would put their case.\(^77\) The Zapatistas excoriated the Carrancistas, the killers of Zapata; the Carrancistas disparaged the Zapatistas — as benighted peasants, practitioners of banditry and pawns of ‘Reaction’ — and distanced themselves from the Obregonistas, who had toppled their hero, the First Chief, *el varón de Cuatro Ciéneas*.\(^78\) Obregonistas and Callistas agreed in their dismissal of Carranza and their common view of Sonora as the cradle of the Revolution, but they were mutually suspicious (not least because Obregón depended on the army, Calles on the labour unions); and loyal Obregonistas, like Aarón Sáenz, kept the flame of their old caudillo burning long after his death in 1928.\(^79\) Eight years later, in 1936, the exile of Calles was welcomed by some of the old Carrancistas (such as Cándido Aguilar, Carranza’s son-in-law), who saw in Cádernas

\(^{76}\) Assassination attempts were made against presidents Ortiz Rubio (1929–30) and Avila Camacho (1940–6); neither was successful and neither was the product of major political conspiracies (they were the work of lone, and not very expert, gunmen). However, in 1993–4 the archbishop of Guadalajara, the PRI presidential candidate, and the party’s secretary-general were all gunned down in broad daylight; and, while the explanations remain contentious, these recent *magnicidios* are widely believed to be linked to broader ‘narco-political’ interests and conflicts.

\(^{77}\) Benjamin, *La Revolución*, 137–8.


\(^{79}\) Benjamin, *La Revolución*, 69. J. W. F. Dulles, interviewing Aarón Sáenz some twenty-five years after Obregón’s assassination, noted how Sáenz’s study resembled an Obregonista shrine (my words, not Dulles’s), containing pictures, busts and mementoes of the dead caudillo; and when Sáenz took his family through the Monument to the Revolution ‘tears came into his eyes’: Benson Lib., Dulles Papers, IV/27.
the avenger of the long-dead First Chief. And throughout, the self-conscious disciples of Madero, the democratic proto-martyr of the Revolution, called for genuine democratization (‘anti-reelectionism’ was their less than catchy slogan) and criticized the corrupt, populist, machine politics which increasingly held sway in Mexico, irrespective of who occupied the presidential palace.  

The creation of a common revolutionary myth — beyond the most superficially bland and banal — was therefore seriously compromised by these intra-revolutionary conflicts. The powerful centrifugal forces of factionalism countered the weak gravitational pull of the incipient revolutionary myth. Some factional conflicts were largely personal and non-ideological. For example, I do not think that Villismo offered a radical alternative to the Carrancista/Sonoran axis which eventually prevailed; still less do I think that Villa’s murder was ‘ideological’, in the sense of responding to ideological or major policy differences; rather, it was an egregious example of standard power politics — the elimination of a threatening rival. Some conflicts, however, did carry an ideological edge: the disciples of Madero preached democracy; those of Zapata, agrarianism. Presidents from Obregón (1920–4) to Salinas (1988–94) regularly invoked Zapata when they wanted to flaunt their agrarian credentials.  

When Calles and Cárdenas squared up to each other in 1934–6, power politics (who would rule in Mexico, the jefe máximo or the President?) conspired with ideology and policy (Calles stood for the status quo, Cárdenas for radical reform). Either way, it proved difficult to agree upon a common myth. Did the Revolution mean liberal-democratic emancipation (the gospel according to Madero), peasant agrarianism (the Zapatista vision), or state-building, economic growth and ‘modernization’ (the Callista alternative)? Even individual caudillos were subject to rival interpretations: thus, Friedrich Katz divides the Villista ‘legends’ (or ‘myths’?) into the black, the white and the epic. One consequence was a surfeit of historiographical debates, which still rumble on; another, more
significant, was a reservoir of icons and images which later \textit{políticos} could exploit: Madero the democrat, Zapata the agrarian, Calles the state-builder, Cárdenas the nationalist.

Other revolutions, of course, have faced this familiar dilemma: how to turn the sow’s ear of a messy revolution into the silk purse of a stable, effective regime. But in Russia and China things were rather different: first, because the victorious revolutionaries had, at least, a coherent ideology with which to work (Marxism: compare the eclectic, loose-at-the-edges, shifting ‘ideology of the Mexican Revolution’);\footnote{Knight, ‘Ideology of the Mexican Revolution’. Not that Marxism is a glabrous monolith; it does, however, possess some key thinkers and canonical texts, hence it is a somewhat more indicative guide to action.} and second, and more important, I think, because the revolutionary victors in Russia and China had both the will and the capacity to enforce uniformity, even as policies and entire ‘projects’ changed. Stalin, notoriously, switched policies, silenced critics and even eliminated his opponents from the historical record; so, somewhat less paranoidically, did Mao Zedong. No such centralized, ‘totalitarian’ control existed in Mexico. The party, as I have said, came into being long after the Revolution; the president, for all his burgeoning power, came and went every four or six years;\footnote{The presidential term lasted for four years up to 1928; thereafter it was extended to six (the famous \textit{sexenio}), which it has remained ever since.} and, of course, the ruling party faced stiff opposition from ‘civil society’, notably the powerful Catholic Church, with which it had to compromise. Thus, while Mexican elites feuded and sometimes killed each other, they did so in a political arena that was more confused, pluralist and decentralized than, for example, that in which Stalin systematically slaughtered his opponents. Again, the murals tell the story: though state-sponsored, the work of Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco was never wholly state-controlled; politico-artistic licence, combined with competing patronage, gave the muralists a latitude which their Soviet counterparts lacked.\footnote{Gruening, \textit{Mexico and its Heritage}, 641; cf. Fitzpatrick, \textit{Everyday Stalinism}, 113. The same would be true of major mass media like film and radio (which lie beyond the scope of this article): official efforts to disseminate ideas and influence opinion, however assiduous, were more than offset by a range of private interests. At root, this reflected the obvious fact that the Mexican Revolution did not establish a command economy and a one-party state as, for example, the Russian Revolution (soon) did.}
Elite conflicts aside, the creation of a Mexican revolutionary myth encountered resistance ‘from below’. Political Catholics, of course, regarded the Revolution (increasingly) as godless, masonic, communistic and pro-Protestant. Such views underpinned the Cristero rebellion of the 1920s and the mass Sinarquista movement of the 1930s.\footnote{The Unión Nacional Sinarquista was a mass clerico-fascistic organization, roughly comparable — and strongly sympathetic — to Spain’s Falange, which acquired widespread support, especially in the centre-west of Mexico in the late 1930s and early 1940s: Jean Meyer, \textit{El Sinarquismo: ¿Un fascismo mexicano?}, 1937–1947 (Mexico City, 1979); Pablo Serrano Álvarez, \textit{La batalla del espíritu: el movimiento sinarquista en el Bajío, 1932–1951}, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 1992).} Hence, as already mentioned, the state took steps to counter these views and present its own version of past and present. At least there was a certain clarity to this conflict: a majority of revolutionaries, whatever their factional allegiance, could agree that the Catholic Church posed a threat and that, more vaguely, the (reified) ‘Revolution’, heir to Independence and the Reforma, confronted a (reified) ‘Reaction’. The Catholics often subscribed to a mirror image of the revolutionary metanarrative: for them, the benefits of Conquest and Colony were squandered by Independence, Reform and Revolution. Many damned the Revolution in its entirety: Toral, as we have seen, shot the wrong man, Obregón being much less of a clerophobe than Calles — but that did not stop provincial Catholics applauding ‘the encouraging news of the death of Obregón’.\footnote{Luis González, \textit{Pueblo en vilo: microhistoria de San José de Gracia} (Mexico City, 1972), 158.} Not until the ‘classic’ (post-1940) period did political Catholicism shift ground, and some Catholics concede ‘heroic’ status to chosen revolutionary caudillos: Villa and Cárdenas.\footnote{Ibid., 200.}

This clear dichotomy aside, the mass of the Mexican people, including many of the revolutionary ‘rank and file’, also entertained different images of the Revolution which they had experienced. In part, subaltern loyalties paralleled the allegiances of the elites: the Zapatistas were strong in Morelos, the Villistas in Chihuahua, the Obregonistas in Sonora, the Cardenistas in Michoacán. Zapata and Villa were popular figures (in terms of both origin and appeal); Carranza, in contrast, provoked no popular ballads (corridos), save those, like \textit{La Cucuracha}, in which he
was lampooned.\textsuperscript{90} Factional allegiance was therefore popular as well as elitist. Many iconic leaders had local or regional roots: for example, Primo Tapia, the agrarian pioneer and martyr of Naranja (Michoacán); or Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the radical governor — and also martyr — of Yucatán.\textsuperscript{91} Since Tapia had taken up arms against Calles, and Carrillo Puerto had fallen victim to the De la Huerta rebellion of 1923–4, these icons — celebrated in songs, pictures and statues — were, in a sense, provincial obstacles to national myth formation. Similarly, every Zapatista statue, song or commemoration (especially, perhaps, those celebrated on 9 April, the day of Zapata’s treacherous killing) reminded devotees of the deceit of the state and the culpability of the Carrancistas.\textsuperscript{92} And so it went on, albeit at a diminishing tempo: the death of Obregón signalled a purge of some of his enemies (such as the labour boss Morones); the ouster of Calles by Ca´rdenas not only ended the political careers of many top Callistas (Luis León, Melchor Ortega and, of course, his son, Rodolfo Elı´as Calles), but also favoured anti-Callistas like Cándido Aguilar and Román Yocupicio. Factional feuds continued to flicker down the years, although time and mortality gradually diminished their intensity.

\textsuperscript{90} Gruening, \textit{Mexico and its Heritage}, 647; Benjamin, \textit{La Revolución}, 67. Even today, the two most celebrated revolutionary heroes are Zapata and Villa (although, surprisingly, Carranza comes fourth, after Madero, but ahead of Ca´rdenas): Ulises Beltrán, \textquote{El \textit{ranking de los héroes patrios},} \textit{Nexos}, cclxxv (2001), 93–4. A caveat: the question that was put to respondents in this survey was \textquote{when you think of heroes in the history of Mexico, who are the first three who come to mind?} — a question which tests salience rather than sympathy per se. It is also worth noting that the outright winners were Juárez and Hidalgo, on 60 per cent, followed by Morelos (27 per cent), then Zapata (17 per cent) and Villa (15 per cent). Thus, while popular revolutionaries outstrip their \textquote{bourgeois} colleagues (Madero: 12 per cent; Ca´rdenas: 10 per cent), all are eclipsed by their three nineteenth-century predecessors. Distance makes the heart grow fonder, it seems.

\textsuperscript{91} Paul Friedrich, \textit{Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village} (Chicago, 1977), tells the grim story of Primo Tapia; for Carrillo Puerto, see G. M. Joseph, \textit{Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States}, 1880–1924 (Cambridge, 1982).

\textsuperscript{92} For examples of political controversy and point-scoring at the time of Zapata’s anniversary, see O’Malley, \textit{Myth of the Revolution}, 45–6, 54–5; Alfonso Taracena, \textit{La revolución desvirtuada, v, Año 1937} (Mexico City, 1968), 79. In 1936, communists (\textquote{sent by the agents of Moscow}) took advantage of the commemoration of Zapata’s death, held in the official forum of Bellas Artes, to attack Portes Gil, then president of the PNR, and to shout \textquote{down with Cedillo!} (the minister of agriculture). See (US Consul) Montgomery, San Luis Potosı´, to State Department, 22 Apr. 1936: State Department Records, College Park, Maryland, Internal Affairs of Mexico, 812.00/30361.
These revolutionary swings and roundabouts were evident at national, regional and local level. Local factional and personal allegiances ran deep: Don Gabriel, a disgruntled old Villista from Namiquipa, Chihuahua, was interviewed by Ana María Alonso and Daniel Nugent some sixty years after Villa’s death:

Lying on a sagging bed, ill, nearly blind, too weak to swat the flies buzzing about his body, Don Gabriel said, ‘What’s the point in talking about the Revolution? My general [Pancho Villa] is dead’. After a while he began to reconsider. ‘Come back tomorrow morning’, he said, ‘and bring some mariachis who can sing Villista corridos. Maybe I’ll be better. Maybe we can talk about the Revolution’.93

At the grass roots, however, there was another, more intractable, problem. It was not just that ‘the people’ sometimes followed the same factional cleavages as their leaders; it was also that ‘the people’ did not share the concept of a reified, progressive, national revolution at all (no matter whether this concept was couched in Maderista, Zapatista, Villista, Obregonista, Callista or Cardenista terms). I do not mean that ‘the people’, being locked in their narrow, parochial, largely illiterate communities (their patrias chicas, ‘little fatherlands’) lacked any notion of the nation or the Revolution.94 On the contrary, recent research tends to confirm that notions of the Mexican nation were quite well established, even before 1910.95 Hence, ‘the people’ probably had a rough idea of what was going on, irrespective of whether they were illiterate.96 The problem, rather, was that

95 Peter F. Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico’s National State: Guerrero, 1800–1857* (Stanford, 1996), stresses the precocity with which remote Indian and mulatto communities espoused new notions of republican citizenship and electoral participation; similar arguments are convincingly advanced in the same author’s *The Time of Liberty: Popular Political Culture in Oaxaca, 1750–1850* (Durham, NC, 2005).
96 It is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the depth of ‘local knowledge’. However, I think it would be wrong to place too much faith in literacy and newsprint as means to banish benighted ignorance and parochialism: for one thing, Mexicans have not usually paid much attention to newspapers (perhaps with good reason). And there are straws in the wind which suggest a brisker circulation of news, even among rustic illiterates, than one might expect. Thus, we find backwoods rebels in 1816 showing a good grasp of events in Spain; or, a hundred years later, a rough revolutionary-bandit (José Inés Chávez García) twitting a captured Italian about his country’s recent defeat (cont. on p. 251)
'the people' formulated their own notions, memories and myths. In particular, the bottom-up, local and popular view of the Revolution tended to be confused, episodic and shapeless.\(^{97}\) For example, even veterans of undoubted Zapatista affiliation recall the Revolution as a tale of sound and fury, punctuated by individual — usually bad — experiences: skirmishes, killings, escapes, depredations, migrations, illnesses and hardships. Decisions — to join the Revolution, to enlist with a particular *cabecilla* (local leader) — often seem random and reactive: ‘if it was a choice between being carted off to fight miles away, God knows where, and staying here to fight, better to stay and fight’; ‘I didn’t want to be a revolutionary, but the government wanted me for a dead body, so I preferred to shoot the bullets myself’.\(^{98}\) One veteran recalls the Zapatistas coming to his village and sequestering his horse: ‘the horse went, but he didn’t go riderless’.\(^{99}\) Popular ballads also present a picture of the Revolution which is often highly personal, episodic and, in its ‘keen sense of reality’, sometimes reminiscent of the philosophy of the Good Soldier Schweik: ‘heroic, tragic, gruesome, pathetic themes prevail. Deeds of valor, floods, earthquakes, famine, calamities generally, which affect the people are instantly sung’.\(^{100}\) The grand leaders of the Revolution — Zapata and Villa aside — are cut down to size: Carranza in *La Cucuracha*; an archetypal careerist in ‘Oh! My Beloved General!’:

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Lieutenant Kiltseven
Got up at ten;
A lieutenant at eleven
He was a captain at twelve;
At ten minutes past noon
General of Division.
He showed great bravery
In the battles he won;
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\(^{(n. 96 \text{ cont.})}\)


\(^{97}\) ‘Their narratives are simple and concrete. Names play a part in them, as do the little, everyday things . . . Their conversations are rich and prodigal in details that to the ears of the worshipful listeners sound like heresy in their apparent insignificance’: Arturo Warman, ‘*We Come to Object*: The Peasants of Morelos and the National State, trans. Stephen K. Ault (Baltimore, 1980), 91–2.

\(^{98}\) *Ibid.*, 113 (my translation of the original differs slightly).

\(^{99}\) *Ibid.*, 114 (my translation of the original differs slightly).

\(^{100}\) Gruening, *Mexico and its Heritage*, 647.
Schweikian realism also consorted with (apparent) political inconsistency. A staunchly Zapatista woman expresses her admiration for Porfirio Díaz and his education minister, Justo Sierra, who brought primary schooling to her village, Milpa Alta. Such individual, sometimes inconsistent, even cynical, accounts are not incompatible with a collective rationale: Zapatismo, however kaleidoscopic it might appear when refracted through personal memories, was clearly a peasant movement, responding to local socio-political conditions and displaying coherent agrarian — and political — goals. In similar fashion the Cristero revolt of the 1920s — a forthrightly religious, hence, in a sense, ideologically coherent movement — generated comparably idiosyncratic accounts and memories.

Thus, not surprisingly, personal narratives and national ‘meta-narratives’ diverged a good deal. In some places — where, unlike Morelos or Chihuahua, the Revolution was weak and unpopular — episodic, reactive and apparently irrelevant recollections prevail almost entirely. In San José de Gracia, a non-revolutionary, perhaps ‘conservative’, community in Michoacán, the year of the Revolution, 1910, was remembered for drought and the visit of Halley’s Comet. Two years later, though news of assorted rebellions by Zapata, Orozco and Félix Díaz filtered through, ‘these reports had come to be regarded as something from another world’; ‘in San José and its environs during this time nothing was happening — except for Elías Martínez’s attempt to become a bird’ (Elías hurled himself from an ash tree flapping ‘wings of grass matting’; ‘he was nearly killed, according to some, because he forgot to make himself a tail and a beak’). Five years later, the Revolution had come to San José, bringing fighting, recession, forced recruitment, highway robbery, sequestrations,

101 Ibid., 649–50 (I have slightly changed the wording).
102 Fernando Horcasitas, De Porfirio Díaz a Zapata: memoria Náhuatl de Milpa Alta (Mexico City, 1968), 37, 39, 85.
103 González, Pueblo en vilo, ch. 5.
104 Ibid., 114, 118. Cf. Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory, i, Past and Present in Contemporary Culture (London, 1994), 12, 443, who notes how ‘in popular [British] memory. . . the great flood or the freak storm may eclipse wars, battles and the rise and fall of governments’. 
abductions, feuds and fornication. The people of San José remembered 1917, the year of the new constitution, as the ‘year of hunger’. Thus, the image of the Revolution as an arbitrary hurricane, sweeping individuals along as if they were wind-blown leaves, which we find in the pages of Mariano Azuela’s novels, was, in a sense, true to life. It reflected the experiences of individuals and families, both revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries alike, who felt themselves to be in the grip of Tolstoyan ‘grand impersonal forces’ over which they had no control. No doubt this is a common grass-roots perspective in times of great collective upheaval and warfare. Individual, close-to-the-ground, ‘bottom-up’ accounts sacrifice distance and perspective for immediacy and impact. The ‘face of battle’ looks very different for foot soldiers in the trenches compared with staff officers back at headquarters, still less the ‘Napierite’ historians who later try to make sense of it all. Time counts as well as distance: as historians we know a lot about the Mexican Revolution which participants, leaders included, did not know at the time (and I refer not just to subsequent outcomes, but also to previous and contemporaneous events and their interrelationship). However, we can only strive inadequately to capture the fears and feelings of participants, be they elite or subaltern. As historians, we are analytically privileged, but emotionally stunted; and any amount of empathy will not turn us into honorary historical actors.

For the revolutionary leaders, this episodic version of the Revolution presented a problem (even if they, as leaders, had probably shared some of the same sentiments and dilemmas). Once the new government was in place, and seeking to parlay short-term survival into long-term regime stability, so the need to forge a stronger, positive, collective image of the Revolution

105 González, Pueblo en vilo, 127.
108 A point worth making, I think, given the current vogue for forms of cultural history which seek, nobly but sometimes naively, to penetrate subaltern thoughts and feelings, thus privileging empathy over evidence, and sometimes sinking into a kind of sloppy romanticism.
109 For example, note the tergiversations of revolutionary leaders at the time of the Villa/Carranza schism in 1914–15: allegiances did not follow a clear class (or other) logic, they were often highly contingent, and they were sometimes also superficial: Knight, Mexican Revolution, ii, 274–85.
became crucial: the initial, fragile, Carrancista regime set about comparing the Mexican to the French Revolution and sought to fix the Revolution in its sequential niche, following Independence and the Reforma. The battle with the Church in the 1920s, with its Manichaean overtones, coinciding with the emergence of a young post-revolutionary generation who had not witnessed the armed struggle, made revolutionary myth-making even more imperative. Azuela, the great novelist of the Revolution, was taken to task precisely because he disseminated the notion of an aimless, episodic revolution, the revolution as hurricane or earthquake, as a capricious force of nature rather than a planned, purposive, patriotic and progressive social movement.

Over time, it seems, elements of the grand myth began to jell, and were grafted onto individual and local versions of revolutionary history. By the 1930s, the revolutionary state had begun to celebrate official anniversaries, key dates in a ‘nationalist calendar’: the death of Madero, the death of Zapata, the outbreak of the Revolution. Statues of revolutionary heroes were belatedly erected; street names were changed (there are now fifty ‘Zapata’ streets in Mexico City); the first official journal of the Revolution appeared; and, in Mexico City, the rusty skeleton of Díaz’s ill-fated legislative chamber was converted into the ponderous Monument to the Revolution (completed in 1938). While the Monument gradually acquired the ashes of Carranza (1941), Madero (1960), Calles (1969), Cardenas (1970) and Villa (1976), the iconography of the exterior was resolutely reified and abstract: it displayed nameless ‘redeemed’ workers and peasants, rather than individual — and contentious — heroes. Likewise, some of the best revolutionary murals — those of Orozco and Siqueiros — depicted abstract forces or personifications, not instantly recognizable caudillos (à la Rivera). Official history followed suit: divisive partisanship had to give way to consensus and ‘eclecticism’ (non-partisanship); factional and personal allegiances had to yield to the reified Revolution (with

110 Benjamin, La Revolución, 60–1.
111 Azuela’s pessimism was shared by other novelists of the time. However, while the latter were often motivated by ‘straightforward right-wing hostility towards the Revolution’ (see Rutherford, Mexican Society during the Revolution, 67, 73), Azuela was a revolutionary veteran, as well as being a better novelist, who had acquired iconic status; hence his criticism cut to the quick.
112 Benjamin, La Revolución, ch. 5.
a capital ‘R’). Ramírez Garrido, editor of the pioneering review *La Revolución Mexicana* (1934), rejoiced — a little prematurely — that ‘with the bitter and painful experience of years, we have now liberated ourselves from this or that -ISTA’.\(^{113}\) What the synthesizers of the 1930s sought was a new myth (in its way no less subjective) which blurred differences and stressed commonalities, so that history would henceforth serve the interests not of divisive factional partisanship, but of ‘revolutionary’ — that is, regime — unity. Myth would serve its key legitimizing function.\(^{114}\) In political science terms, this was to be a step in the direction of ‘elite convergence’, the discursive counterpart of the elite ‘pact’ of 1929 which had established the PNR.\(^{115}\)

The success of this strategy is hard to measure.\(^{116}\) As I stated at the outset, it is often supposed that the myth of the Revolution crucially underpinned the stability of the post-revolutionary regime. But the ‘post hoc ergo propter hoc’ fallacy may be lurking here: we know the regime endured, we can see the historiographical and iconographic efforts of the regime, and we perhaps too readily assume a decisive causal link. The murals and monuments, famous and eye-catching, are a case in point. Though the mobility of Mexicans has often been greater than historians have supposed, the percentage of the population who, prior to the 1940s, beheld the Monument to the Revolution or filed past the murals in the Ministry of Education must have been tiny. And not all were impressed. The Monument to the Revolution looked, to some observers, like ‘the world’s largest petrol station’.\(^{117}\) And, when it came to collecting public subscriptions to pay for it, only 10 per cent of the cost was recouped; the rest had to be coughed up by the Party and the city government (in other words, by the

\(^{113}\) *Ibid.*, 143.

\(^{114}\) Tudor, *Political Myth*, 91, 139.


\(^{117}\) *Ibid.*, 133. Is there any way of measuring the number of people who may have seen the Monument or the murals — let alone the impact either may have had on spectators? By way of establishing some numerical benchmark, we might note that, in the space of ten hours, nearly 150,000 people were said to have filed past the body of Archbishop Pascual Díaz as he lay in state in the Mexico City Cathedral in May 1936: Schott to State Department, 9 June 1936: State Department Records, Internal Affairs of Mexico, 812.00/30379.
state). Changing school textbooks or street names could be a contentious business, which provoked more dissent than consensus. The murals, we have seen, initially got a mixed reception. Though they later became an integral part of Mexican folkloric nationalism, this was a slow process, more metropolitan than provincial. In small-town Michoacán, about 1960, ‘Mexican mural painting’ had no place in the people’s mental landscape, which put it in the same irrelevant category as ‘existentialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, neuroses, psychedelics, racism, yoga and the philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin’.

For the revolutionary myth to make headway on a broader front it needed more diffuse, daily and insistent forms of communication. Probably the most effective was the primary school, which, by the 1930s, had become both ubiquitous and endowed with a conscious mission to change popular mores and perceptions. For the first time, standard textbooks were supplied by the state, emphasizing nationalist and revolutionary values. The school was expected to make Mexicans more patriotic and productive (hence, borrowing Lynn Hunt’s phrase, it sought to inculcate

118 Benjamin, La Revolución, 132; see also Alfonso Taracena, La revolución desvirtuada, ii, Año 1934 (Mexico City, 1966), 45.
119 In 1934 the governor of Jalisco burned 8,000 copies of Abel Gámiz’s Historia de México, so that schoolchildren would avoid its contagion: Taracena, La revolución desvirtuada, ii, 45. Similarly, the change in street names could generate resentment, or indifference: people protested and continued to use the old names in defiance of the new orthodoxy, for example in León in the 1940s: Daniel Newcomer, ‘The Symbolic Battleground: The Culture of Modernization in 1940s León, Guanajuato’, Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos, xviii (2002), 73–82. For Mexico City, see Patrice Elizabeth Olsen, ‘Revolution in the City Streets: Changing Nomenclature, Changing Form, and the Revision of Public Memory’, in Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis (eds.), The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940 (Durham, NC, 2007), who reaches the safe conclusion that both space and history were ‘contested’.
120 Gonzaéllez, Pueblo en vilo, 245.
122 Loyo, ‘Lectura para el pueblo’, 337–9; Vaughan, Cultural Politics in Revolution, 97, 125, 182–3. Lerner, Historia de la Revolución Mexicana, ch. 5, discusses the broad thrust of ‘socialist education’, suggesting (pp. 104–5) that it was both confused and unconvincing. For a more positive evaluation, focusing on Zapatismo and agrarianism, see Lynn Stephen, Zapata Lives! Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico (Berkeley, 2002), 42–54. It seems likely that, while the ‘socialist’ content of teaching in the later 1930s proved divisive and even counter-productive, the decade saw vital advances in terms of infrastructure and recruitment, which bore fruit when ‘socialism’ was shelved after 1940.
'rationalizing and nationalizing values'). But, over time, it also promoted, with some success, a more unified, consensual and reified image of the Revolution, blurring the factional divisions of the past and focusing on the ‘high principles emanating from the Revolution’. It sought to mould minds, but also to exorcize ghosts. As Renan pointed out a long time ago, collective ‘imaginaries’ involve a good deal of selective amnesia.

In addition to the school, the regime of the 1930s could deploy the press, radio, film, sport and public events to disseminate its ‘mythic’ message. At critical moments, such as the nationalization of the Anglo-American oil companies in March 1938, the state’s power of nationalist mobilization was impressive: it could get thousands onto the streets; thus it could mount massive collective demonstrations — which stressed, *inter alia*, how the economic emancipation of 1938 consummated the political independence of 1821. We should, of course, be careful about assuming that the thousands on the street, or the tens of thousands of radio listeners and film viewers, ‘internalized’ the messages they received, or uncritically consumed the now established myth of the Revolution. Clearly, some — those recalcitrant political Catholics again — were immune. They avoided the demonstrations, tuned in to other programmes and watched different films. Since the regime was far from totalitarian, the state enjoyed no monopoly of the mass media. In fact, the politically correct films of the 1930s, like those of El Indio Fernández, were

124 For example, *Los maestros y la cultura nacional, 1920–1952*, iii, Centro (Mexico City, 1987), 12, 28.
128 In the 1930s, when the Ministry of Education distributed free radios to villages (villages which had probably benefited from land reform and certainly were endowed with federal schools: so, in theory, ‘revolutionary’ communities), the sets came locked into a single official channel, Radio XFX (‘to ensure that the radios were used only for the government’s intended goals of education and cultural unification’); but the villagers soon opened them up and retuned them to more popular stations: ‘in village after village’, an inspector found, ‘people were listening to everything but station XFX’: Hayes, ‘National Imaginings on the Air’, 243–4.
less successful than the classic ‘ranchero comedies’ which generated a quite different ‘public transcript’: one in which parish priests — the lascivious reactionaries of the revolutionary black legend — were benignly avuncular, and landlords, the grasping exploiters of the legend, were well-meaning, populist patriarchs.129 The music-hall artist turned film star Cantinflas (Mario Moreno), whose career was now taking off, hardly epitomized mythical revolutionary qualities: his depiction of the work-shy, fast-talking *pelado* (‘layabout, ruffian’) evoked Charlie Chaplin or the Good Soldier Schweik; and he mercilessly lampooned the politicians of the day.130 Political Catholics also showed their continued repudiation of the Revolution, its regime and the regime’s assiduous myth-making by supporting overtly hostile organizations, such as the UNS (Unión Nacional Sinarquista, 1937), the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional, 1939) and the Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia, all of which prospered during the 1930s, in reaction to Cardenismo, and in emulation of European (clerical) fascism. Big business, newly mobilized in opposition to organized labour, took a similar — if more pragmatic — line, which involved the formulation and dissemination of an anti-revolutionary counter-discourse.131

Thus, when the regime peddled its standard teleology (Independence > Reforma > Revolution; Hidalgo > Juárez > Zapata/Carranza/Obregón/Calles/Cárdenas: take your pick), political Catholics responded with their own ‘metanarrative’ (Crown, Colony and Church > Iturbide > Maximilian and sometimes > Díaz). They also invoked their trump card — the Catholic Church — and the queen of trumps, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Indeed, there is a sense in which the regime, for all its supposed ‘secular religion’, could never outbid the transcendental appeal of

129 Joanne Hershfield, ‘Screening the Nation’, in Vaughan and Lewis (eds.), *Eagle and Virgin.*

130 Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (Wilmington, 2001), who notes how, like the regime itself, Cantinflas grew more conservative and complacent over time: by the 1950s he had lost his critical satirical edge.

131 Thus, following Cárdenas’s bold confrontation with the Monterrey bourgeoisie in February 1936, local businessmen ‘fostered’ the growth of Acción Cívica, which acquired a ‘wide membership’, and whose ‘alleged purpose’ was ‘to foment interest in patriotic objects, such as the commemoration of the composition of the Mexican national hymn’; behind this disinterested discourse, however, the ‘real object ... was clearly to combat the alleged Communist tendency of the present Mexican government’: (US Consul) Nathan to State Department, 30 July 1936: State Department Records, Internal Affairs of Mexico, 812.504/1610.
Catholicism, which had deep and ancient reservoirs to draw upon. Revolutionary efforts to plagiarize Catholicism, with revolutionary baptisms and Christlike depictions of revolutionary martyrs, suggested a certain desperation.\textsuperscript{132} The state was on surer ground when, like Cárdenas, it avoided such direct competition and played to its strengths: this-worldly coercion, clientelism and social reform. As a result, the ensuing battle of rival national myths never ceased; it occurred at local as well as national level; it ensured that the Revolution never achieved a discursive monopoly; and it made possible, as I shall note in conclusion, the ultimate revenge of the political Catholics in 2000.

But how far did the great mass of Mexicans who were not political Catholics, especially those supportive of the Revolution, buy into the official myth, thus enabling it to achieve, if not a discursive monopoly, at least some form of ideological hegemony? It is impossible to be precise.\textsuperscript{133} My hunch is that the revolutionary regime had some success at weaving local and particular histories into the grand story, blurring some of the more obvious internal tensions, and thus converting ‘parochial’ revolutionary sympathizers into supporters of the national regime.\textsuperscript{134} We cannot confidently infer this outcome from sheer demonstrations of popular support (like those which greeted the 1938 oil nationalization): as James Scott has rightly reminded us, outward conformity may mask inner dissent;\textsuperscript{135} and there is good evidence that, over decades, the revolutionary regime became adept at mobilizing support — and silencing overt dissent — by means of subtle, and some not so subtle, clientelist practices. Some of the crowds on the streets, in other words, were rent-a-crowds,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{132}Knight, ‘Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State’.
\item \textsuperscript{133}Benjamin, \textit{La Revolución}, 136. To my knowledge, there is no systematic polling data relating to Mexican attitudes and beliefs prior to the 1960s, and the early polls do not inspire complete confidence. Mass surveys are really a product of the 1980s and 1990s, which does not afford a very long time sequence in which to chart changing public opinion.
\item \textsuperscript{134}This progressive blending of local and national revolutionary loyalties thus repeated, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, the process whereby, a century earlier, patriotic liberalism had similarly fused local and national allegiances, at least in many communities (see n. 41 above). However, whereas war had provided the — fortuitous — catalyst in the 1860s, schooling was now the principal and more purposive agent of change.
\end{itemize}
even during the revolutionary-nationalist apotheosis of March 1938.\textsuperscript{136}

Thus, between the extremes of outright repression on the one hand and eager popular endorsement on the other lay an extensive grey area, where the regime elicited support — often grudging, conditional, even faintly fatalistic — on the basis of expediency. \textit{Ejidalarios} (land reform beneficiaries) who wanted to keep their land had to support the regime, as did trade unionists who sought the favour of the state arbitration service. Civil servants were government supporters by definition.\textsuperscript{137} To some degree, therefore, demonstrations of mass adherence to the ‘public transcript’ were a testimony to state patronage and state sanctions; they cannot be taken as incontrovertible proof of popular internalizations of the norms of the revolutionary regime and its associated myth.

\textbf{The Classic Period, 1940–1982}

There is, however, some suggestive — not conclusive — evidence of the permeation of those norms. That evidence derives from the 1960s, which means that we make a penultimate chronological leap from the formative period of myth construction to the ‘classic’ (post-1940) period, which saw the comfortable heyday of the Pax PRIísta and the Mexican ‘economic miracle’ (c.1950–c.1980). During that period, the official party enjoyed unprecedented electoral support and the regime faced no serious threat to its stability; hence, as the rest of Latin America reeled from civilian to military rule and back again, Mexico remained a major oasis of political continuity, civilian government and sustained, low-inflation economic growth. During the same period, the myth of the Revolution crystallized (or, some would say, ossified). More statues went up; the Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana (1953) began a plethora of publications; a fresh batch of free textbooks — still nationalist and ‘revolutionary’, but less ‘socialist’ and class-conscious in their emphases — was delivered to the proliferating primary

\textsuperscript{136} Knight, ‘Politics of the Expropriation’.

\textsuperscript{137} For example Benjamin, \textit{La Revolución}, 114. It should be remembered, however, that, contrary to some assertions, the Mexican government bureaucracy, at least during the formative and classic periods, was not that enormous (it could not compare, for instance, with its Soviet equivalent, even in relative terms). Bureaucratic hypertrophy did not occur in Mexico until the 1970s.
In 1960 the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution was celebrated with a good deal of official complacency and back-slapping; the Revolution was applauded for its constructive achievements over half a century, while the murderous civil strife of the early years was glossed over. The official party, since 1946 the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, now looked a lot more Institutional than it did Revolutionary.

Again, it does not follow that discursive efforts, the monotonous incantation of the myth, guaranteed stability. In my view, clientelism coupled with economic growth, which in turn made clientelism more feasible, explains a great deal, without requiring forays into normative/discursive aetiology. However, there is some good evidence that, by the 1960s, when reliable survey data first becomes available, many Mexicans had internalized the values — hence, in part, the myth — of the Mexican Revolution. The early surveys show that, while Mexicans entertained a healthy scepticism about politicians, trade unions and (above all) the police, they still placed faith in the goals and aspirations of the Mexican Revolution. Schoolchildren, too, were reasonably well informed about national heroes and the Mexican political system. Of course, knowing is not the same as believing or endorsing (although, it is worth pointing out, knowing — that is, cognitive grasp — is a necessary prerequisite of believing — that is, affective endorsement). But there is evidence that schools successfully inculcated notions of nationalism and social solidarity, which accorded with the broad principles of the Revolution. Some cognitive and normative ‘internalization’ of the Revolution and its myth clearly occurred,

138 Benjamin, La Revolución, 124, 148–9, 150.
139 México: cincuenta años de revolución.
141 Segovia, La politización del niño mexicano.
142 Bradley A. Levinson, We Are All Equal: Student Culture and Identity at a Mexican Secondary School, 1988–1998 (Durham, NC, 2001), found a strong ethic of social solidarity, nationalism and egalitarianism among secondary-school teachers: ‘virtually all the teachers shared a strong commitment to the integrative goals of the State and the formation of a national identity’ (p. 76). These teachers, born between roughly 1930 and 1965, would have been typical products of official pedagogy during the classic period. However, their pupils were veering in a quite different direction: they were ignorant of history, tepid in their displays of patriotism, and concerned to make good individually in an increasingly competitive market society.
even if it is impossible to measure its scope, and, perhaps, easy to exaggerate its impact.

While surveys did not usually probe historical beliefs and assumptions, they suggest that the myth of the Revolution had won converts, even if respondents believed that the politicians of the day were venal and corrupt. Thus, the Revolution to some extent emancipated itself from quotidian politics: a reasonable litmus test of legitimacy. Using James Scott’s terminology, we could say that the myth of the Revolution provided a form of ‘public transcript’, widely, though far from unanimously, endorsed, against which citizens — often critical and disgruntled citizens — judged the regime, its minions and its actions. Quantitative evidence apart, the oral, impressionistic record suggests that the grand myth had either supplanted, or been grafted onto, the episodic memories of early participants (a process which has been referred to as ‘encapsulation’). What is more, by the 1960s, those early participants were fast dwindling in number (the veterans of the armed revolution were now a small elderly minority, while those who had lived through the radical days of the Cárdenas reforms in the 1930s were well into middle age). Thus it became easier for the regime to gloss over the awkward tensions of earlier periods, which, for most Mexicans, were now part of ‘pure’ history, detached from personal experience and ‘imagined’ on the basis of family upbringing, schooling and the popular media, especially film and radio. Once again, temporal distance made the heart grow fonder, even as the memory grew fainter.


144 With a population growth of 3.5 per cent per year in 1960, Mexico was an increasingly young society: 45 per cent of Mexicans were under 15, while only 11 per cent were over 50 (that is, born before the Revolution broke out in 1910): Jorge Martinez Manautou (ed.), The Demographic Revolution in Mexico, 1970–1980 (Mexico City, 1982), 21, 26.

145 Segovia, La politización del niño mexicano, 90, notes that Juárez — the most popular historical figure — had the advantage (over the revolutionaries of 1910–20) of being older and more remote. The advantages of age are broadly confirmed by Beltrán, ‘El ranking de los héroes patrios’, 94 (Juárez ties for first place with Hidalgo).
Thus, while the stability and hegemony of the PRI primarily depended on economic and politico-clientelist factors, the now established myth of the Revolution, shared by many, but not all Mexicans, also helped. Compared with most Latin American countries, therefore, Mexico possessed a fairly well-developed sense of nationality, historical trajectory and related norms, which transcended the venal failings of politicians. As one schoolteacher put it: ‘history, impelled by the Revolution in a progressive direction, cannot be held back, even if there are backward groups in Mexico who might try’.

The Post-Classic Period, 1982 Onwards

But, as today’s Mexican policy-makers and opinion-mongers might respond: ‘nous avons changé tout cela’. Since the 1980s, if not before, the hegemony of the PRI and its ‘revolutionary’ ideology have faded: challenges have emerged from civil society, from the political opposition, and from the changing global political economy; hence the old model has been progressively discarded and, in the crucial election of 2000, the PRI surrendered power to a PANista president, an ideological descendant of the political Catholics who had challenged the legitimacy of the Revolution almost since its inception. This transformation occurred amid economic crises, armed rebellion and a renewed bout of magnicidios (low-level assassinations, we should note, had never ceased, even at the height of the Pax PRIista). The current post-classic period, like its pre-Columbian counterpart (c.800–1519), has been a ‘time of troubles’, following the long stability and stasis of the classic era.

It is also a complex transformation which, unlike the Revolution, is too recent to benefit from profound historical analysis.

146 The question of national identity is, of course, analytically distinct from that of revolutionary allegiance: the Revolution may have sought to inculcate a specific form of revolutionary nationalism, yoking Nation and Revolution together in a tight twosome, but there were robust alternative forms of nationalism (for example the clerical Catholic version); and, I would argue, Mexico’s national identity, in its varied and shifting forms, long antedated the Revolution. The Revolution could capitalize on existing national sentiments (hence the Independence > Reforma > Revolution sequence), but it could claim no effective monopoly of nationalism, and allegiance to the Revolution could fade without any necessary erosion of national identity. Compare the Russian > Soviet > Russian experience.

147 Lourdes Arispe, citing maestro Ernesto Romero Sánchez, in ‘Prólogo’, in Los maestros y la cultura nacional, iii, 12. See also Levinson, We Are All Equal, 33, 67, 78, 371.
The decline and (partial) fall of the PRI responded to political causes (the growth of opposition, especially in the burgeoning cities and the prosperous north); to economic shifts (the exhaustion of the old import-substituting industrialization model in the 1970s and the rush to neo-liberalism, spurred by the debt crisis of the 1980s); and, it has been argued, to the discursive bankruptcy of the Revolution after about 1968. Again, I would stress the first two causes over the last. Major changes in both the Mexican and the global political economy made the maintenance of the old development model difficult, if not impossible. As a result, by the 1980s Mexico was mired in debt, experiencing high inflation, and committed to a programme of privatization, free trade and North American integration. The architects of these new policies, presidents De la Madrid (1982–8) and Salinas (1988–94), decided that a discursive break had to accompany these changes of policy. For decades, Mexican governments had parroted revolutionary slogans — nationalist, reformist, populist — even as their policies promoted a regressive capitalism and growing inequality. During the 1960s and 1970s, observers readily noted the great gulf which, since the 1940s, had opened up between rhetoric and practice, between the public transcript and public conduct (which the Almond and Verba data tended to corroborate). For decades, too, opponents of the regime had invoked the myth of the Revolution — the regime’s ‘public transcript’ — as a means to challenge its legitimacy. Agrarian rebels like Rubén Jaramillo, hunted down and killed by the army in 1962, invoked the memory and example of Zapata (both happened to be natives of Morelos). Civilian and

148 The date when the decline of the PRI began is open to debate. The student movement and repression of 1968 is often cited and, perhaps, exaggerated, given the two sexenios of PRTista dominance which followed. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, decline is unmistakable; and some experts have no hesitation in attributing decline to discursive bankruptcy: ‘myth is a metaphor for society’s faith and hope in the nation and a key subjective element of social cohesion. A chilling component of the NAFTA period (1992 onwards) is that Mexicans find themselves with no national myth at all. Revolutionary nationalism has evaporated . . . [and] with the absence of hope in a clear national project . . . Mexico finds itself mired in the process of disintegration’: James F. Rochlin, cited (approvingly) in Gawronski, ‘Revolution Is Dead’, 391.


150 Tanalís Padilla, Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax PRTista, 1940–1962 (Durham, NC, 2008). Zapata was regularly invoked by agrarian rebels and protesters: Armando Bartra, Los herederos de
electoral protests, like that associated with Dr Salvador Nava in San Luis Potosí, cited the democratic example of Madero.\textsuperscript{151} Both the regime and its opponents therefore appealed to the same history and the same heroes. This was a discursive civil war, fought on the traditional terrain of the Revolution; terrain which, after decades of assiduous myth-making, was well known to all Mexicans.

But it was a war the regime won, at least in the sense of comfortably retaining power. Jaramillo was killed and Nava was defrauded. It is hard to believe that the regime’s victory depended on its superior normative claims: as we have seen, many Mexicans doubted the regime’s fidelity to its ‘public transcript’ and the revolutionary myth was looking increasingly ‘mythical’ (in the secondary, colloquial sense of false or unconvincing: ‘any belief that has no foundation in fact’).\textsuperscript{152} But the regime could still crack heads; it controlled the electoral process; and it exercised substantial influence over the mass media. However, up to, and even including, the 1970s, the PRI presided over a robust economy, in which real wages rose and young Mexicans could reasonably expect to enjoy a better education and life chances than their parents. If rapid growth provided jobs for Mexico’s swelling population, the PRI, and its allied trade unions, controlled a significant slice of the job market, including coveted positions in government, party and bureaucracy. The regime could withstand a good deal of structural hypocrisy — spouting revolutionary rhetoric long after the Revolution had been consigned to history


\textsuperscript{152} Tudor, Political Myth, 13. For some postmodern enraged, of course, all history is ‘mythical’ (i.e. subjective and unverifiable), hence ‘myth’ and ‘history’ are interchangeable. However, I would agree with Stocking that ‘a distinction between myth and history, or between more and less mythical views of history is worth attempting in the practice of historiography’; and, indeed, without such a distinction this article becomes meaningless. See George W. Stocking, ‘Maclay, Kubary, Malinowski: Archetypes from the Dreamtime of Anthropology’, in George W. Stocking Jr (ed.), Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge (Madison, 1991), 12–13.
— so long as the economy grew, jobs were available and living standards rose.

By the 1980s, however, the good times were over. The PRI’s pact with the people — a low-budget Mexican variant of François Guizot’s *enrichissez-vous* — began to fall apart, as unemployment rose, inflation eroded real wages and state benefits were cut. The gap between revolutionary rhetoric (or myth), on the one hand, and ‘revolutionary’, that is, PRIista, practice, on the other, grew greater, becoming both more obvious and, to the mass of the people, more galling. In the 1970s, President Echeverría, chastened by the student protest of 1968, sought, in erratic populist fashion, to close the gap by reviving land reform, boosting state spending and indulging in radical ‘Third World’ nationalist rhetoric. The result was sharp political polarization, high inflation, huge debt, capital flight and the ‘delegitimization’ of the presidency.153

The neo-liberal technocrats who came to power in the 1980s therefore elected to close the discursive gap in a different way: not by returning to the old policies of agrarian reform and economic nationalism (as Echeverría had attempted, and as radicals like Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Subcomandante Marcos still advocated),154 but by pitching a new, neo-liberal appeal to the people, especially to the burgeoning and discontented middle classes of the teeming cities; an appeal which the multinationals and foreign banks welcomed, along with powerful elements within the Mexican private sector.155 It fell to Carlos Salinas (1988–94), one of Mexico’s most clever and inventive presidents, to break decisively with the discursive past — with the myth of the Revolution — and to try to shift the PRI’s claims to legitimacy

154 I do not mean to suggest that Cárdenas, as leader of the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática), or Marcos, spokesman of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional; Zapatista Army of National Liberation), simply recycled the old nostrums of the Revolution: both — Marcos especially — also innovated; and the PRD has evolved since its foundation in 1988. Nevertheless, both defended the ‘revolutionary’ principles of agrarian reform and economic nationalism in the face of the neo-liberal critique of the late 1980s and early 1990s.
155 The Mexican private sector was divided over the question of economic liberalization: some of the larger, northern businesses, closely linked to the United States, were in favour; smaller companies, dependent on high tariffs and the domestic market, were leery.
to a new ‘First World’, economic and technocratic rationale. The Salinas project, which was broadly maintained by his PRIista successor, Ernesto Zedillo, embodied several elements. To the aspiring middle class it promised economic growth, modernization, free trade (hence cheap foreign imports) and a democratic opening, at least to the right — to the business-friendly, discreetly Catholic PAN. To the poor, Salinas offered PRONASOL (the National Solidarity Programme), a cleverly updated form of traditional populism, which provided material benefits at the hands of a casually dressed, folksy, itinerant president. To the United States, Salinas held out the unprecedented proposal of a free trade zone. But to the parliamentary left, chiefly the nascent PRD, which still carried the torch of the Revolution and was led by the son of the great reformist president of the 1930s, Lázaro Cárdenas, Salinas proved implacably hostile.

Unlike previous PRI presidents, Salinas was not content to change policy while retaining — and paying hypocritical lip-service to — the old myth of the Revolution. He explicitly wound up the land reform programme, ending redistribution and enabling ejidatarios to buy the freehold of their plots. He acknowledged the juridical personality of the Catholic Church and welcomed the pope to Mexico. And, of course, he sacrificed traditional economic nationalism on the altar of NAFTA. But he went further: he sought to legitimate his project with a new label — ‘social liberalism’ — and a new lineage, that of progressive nineteenth-century liberalism, which was supposedly democratic, market-friendly, patriotic and socially responsible. ‘Social liberalism’, which was briefly promoted with Orwellian

156 Miguel Ángel Centeno, Democracy within Reason: Technocratic Revolution in Mexico (University Park, 1994), is the best survey in English.
159 The effects have been quite limited: Wayne A. Cornelius and David Myhre (eds.), The Transformation of Rural Mexico: Reforming the Ejido Sector (La Jolla, 1998).
ingenuity and enthusiasm, was a makeshift ideology, which tradi-
duced history and patently served contemporary political inter-
ests. It had the great advantage of vaulting over the Revolution
of 1910, and seeking historical purchase in the distant mid nine-
teenth century, finding precursors, such as Ponciano Arriaga,
who were reassuringly remote, obscure and uncontentious. It
was an ersatz myth which probably won few genuine converts,
but which at least provided a convenient discursive façade for
Salinas’s ingenious blend of economic neo-liberalism and polit-
ical populism. It worked so long as the policies worked.

In addition, Salinas promoted a reform of the education cur-
riculum which, even more boldly, discarded the old historical
myths in favour of a new, neo-liberal, Salinista mélange. In
1992 — a year when the quincentenary focused attention on
the plight of Native Americans — Salinas’s education minister,
Ernesto Zedillo, introduced a swathe of contentious new com-
pulsory, free, school textbooks.161 They were contentious in part
because of the way contracts were awarded; but much more so
because of the contents of the books. Critics of the history texts
claimed that the books eliminated old popular heroes (Jacinto
Canek, El Pípila, Felipe Carrillo Puerto); gave cursory or overly
critical treatment to others (Cuauhtémoc, the Niños Héroes,
Juárez, Zapata); rehabilitated erstwhile villains (Iturbide, Santa
Anna, Díaz); neglected the post-1940 struggles of peasants and
Indians; and, unlike most previous texts, marched resolutely up
to the present, giving short shrift to the presidents of the classic
era (Díaz Ordaz, Echeverría, López Portillo), but dwelling at
length on the wise statesmanship of President Salinas himself.
The old themes of revolutionary nationalism and class struggle
were excised, in favour of ‘economic modernization’, which
meant low tariffs, privatization, state-shrinking and dollops of
foreign investment.162

As a result of the ensuing outcry, the books were never issued,
but left to moulder in a Mexico City warehouse. Salinas’s attempt
to trash the myth of the Revolution had, it seemed, backfired. The
lesson was rammed home with the uprising of the EZLN on 1
January 1994 and, six years later, with the comfortable victory of

161 Dennis Gilbert, ‘Rewriting History: Salinas, Zedillo and the 1992 Textbook
Controversy’, Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos, xiii (1997), offers the best résumé
in English.
162 Ibid., 276–7.
the opposition PAN in the historic presidential election of July 2000. In breaking with their discursive past, it seemed, the PRI contrived to lose power after seventy-one years in office.

There is some truth in this argument, just as there is some truth in the notion that the long hegemony of the PRI, especially during its classic heyday, was bolstered by a discursive legitimacy, rooted in the myth of the Revolution. But this truth can easily be exaggerated. Just as the old — enduring, successful, revolutionary — myth depended on favourable politico-economic circumstances, so, too, Salinas’s new — short-lived, experimental, ‘social liberal’ — myth was vulnerable to politico-economic vicissitudes. Salinas clearly resolved to relinquish the old norms along with the old policies; he did not want to maintain and exacerbate the structural hypocrisy involved in claiming revolutionary — hence, nationalist, reformist, redistributionist, agrarian — legitimacy, while winding up the ejido, cutting tariffs, privatizing state enterprises, embracing the pope and joining NAFTA. The widening gap between discourse and practice threatened to become an unbridgeable chasm, and Salinas decided to effect a closer fit by ditching the greater part of the old discourse. In so doing, he sought a new electoral alliance with the growing urban middle class, while placating the poor with PRONASOL. For most of his presidency, he succeeded. Initially weak, he became a remarkably popular president.163 The left opposed his policies, but he recouped support on the centre and right. ‘Social liberalism’ did not, I think, win hordes of genuine converts, but it provided the window-dressing for a neo-liberal project which, so long as it brought economic recovery and low inflation, was genuinely popular: hence the strong performance of the PRI in the mid-term elections of 1991 and the victory of the party’s candidate, Ernesto Zedillo, in the — generally free and fair — elections of July 1994.164

Ditching revolutionary discourse certainly caused offence in some quarters. The PRD combined elements of the old left,  

163 Schettino, Cien años de confusión, 426, 434; Kathleen Bruhn, Taking on Goliath: The Emergence of a New Left Party and the Struggle for Democracy in Mexico (University Park, 1997), 272–3.

164 In 1988 the PRI received, according to the official count, 49 per cent of the presidential vote (the opposition claimed the true figure was nearer 33 per cent); but in 1991 the party bounced back to 61 per cent, while in 1994 it got a (genuine) 49 per cent, compared with the PAN’s 26 per cent: Vikram K. Chand, Mexico’s Political Awakening (Notre Dame, 2001), 47–53.
including the Communist Party, with ex-PRIista dissidents who resented the technocrats’ takeover of their party. The Zapatistas rebellled in opposition to Salinas, NAFTA and neoliberalism. And, on the narrower but significant battlefield of education, Salinas was forced to withdraw his new, neo-liberal textbooks. (The politics of Mexican education, however, is notoriously complicated and devious. A good deal of opposition stemmed from vested interests, protecting jobs and power, rather than from the disinterested outrage of revolutionary nationalists: the instrumental use of myth is not a monopoly of the PRI or the government.) It is crucial to note, however, that all these challenges — the formation of the PRD, the textbook controversy, the Zapatista revolt — preceded Zedillo’s comfortable election, as PRI presidential candidate, in the summer of 1994.

Salinas left office an apparently successful president; it seemed that he had successfully subverted both the political economy and the myth of the Revolution.

The subversion was real, but the success was ephemeral. In December 1994 a major economic crisis followed on the heels of Zedillo’s inauguration. Mexico entered its third recession in twelve years, and its worst since 1930. We need not probe the causes or immediate consequences: suffice to say that the 1994–5 recession, which dashed both hopes of First World affluence and confidence in neo-liberal economic management, made possible the dramatic victory of Vicente Fox and the PAN in the presidential election of 2000.

Salinas’s calculated dismissal of the old myth of the Revolution, while it had offended some, had gratified others; and probably left many indifferent. It did not, of itself, ruin his reputation or doom the PRI. His fall from grace derived from economic mismanagement, coupled with

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165 Bruhn, *Taking on Goliath*, ch. 3.
166 The Zapatista rebellion attracted more superficial comment than serious scholarship. Sound analyses in English are George A. Collier with Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland, 1994); Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* (Durham, NC, 1998).
167 Throughout the 1990s economic issues were uppermost in voters’ minds: Oppenheimer, *Bordering on Chaos*, 152–4; Jorge I. Domínguez and James A. McCann, *Democratizing Mexico: Public Opinion and Electoral Choices* (Baltimore, 1996), 158.
168 Whether the blame lay with outgoing President Salinas or incoming President Zedillo is — and will remain — a matter of acrimonious debate; the argument goes beyond the personal and hinges on the relative weight of structural causes (the whole (cont. on p. 271)
subsequent revelations of Salinista corruption, not from lèse-majesté against the myth of the Revolution. That myth had progressively parted company with practical reality since 1940, even when it remained on the lips of every career politician in the carro completo, the ‘full bus’, of the PRI. In Mexico, as in eastern Europe,\(^{169}\) myth and reality had diverged, producing a kind of structural hypocrisy on the part of the regime, and a deeply rooted cynicism on the part of many Mexicans. The myth was certainly weaker than it had been in its heyday; but it was not defunct, and it retained an appeal in distinct sectors and regions, as the election of 1988 and the neo-Zapatista movement revealed.\(^{170}\) By the time Salinas took the bold decision to repudiate the myth of the Revolution, it had come to serve less as an effective means of legitimizing the regime, than as a rallying cry for opponents: independent unions who demonstrated en masse in the shadow of the Monument to the Revolution;\(^{171}\) an opposition party whose leader fortunately combined the evocative names of Cuauhtémoc and Cárdenas;\(^{172}\) and masked guerrillas who, denouncing Salinas and NAFTA, raised the banner of Zapata in the remote Lacandon forests of Chiapas. By the 1990s, the myth of the Revolution — carefully inculcated during the formative period and complacently maintained throughout the long classic era — had been captured by the opposition and turned against the regime itself. Its function was now more contestatory than legitimizing. Salinas’s repudiation of the myth was part cause, part consequence, of this new alignment. But, as the electoral fortunes of the party during the 1990s showed, repudiation did not spell

\(^{(n. 168 \text{ cont.})}\)

Salinista neo-liberal project) as against contingent decisions (the so-called ‘errors of December [1994]’) taken by the Zedillo administration.


\(^{171}\) Benjamin, *La Revolución*, 161–2, lists examples: railwaymen in 1959, electricians in 1975, university workers in 1979. When, in 1958, the schoolteachers formed an independent union, the Movimiento Revolucionario del Magisterio, they proclaimed that it ‘has faith in the Mexican Revolution and its emancipatory task and declares each of its members a soldier in that Revolution’; Aurora Loyo Brambila, *El movimiento magisterial de 1958 en México* (Mexico City, 1979), 87.

\(^{172}\) Cuauhtémoc being the Aztec prince who died resisting the Spaniards (and whose bones had supposedly been discovered at Ixcatéopan: see n. 49 above); and (Lázaro) Cárdenas being the radical reforming president of the 1930s.
defeat; a neo-liberal, technocratic PRI could count on a sizeable counter-constituency to whom the myth of the Revolution had never appealed (political Catholics, big business, the conservative middle class) or for whom it had lost its old lustre. The PRI fell not so much because its discursive ammunition ran out, but because, having claimed technocratic expertise, it grossly mismanaged the economy, or was seen to do so. The Mexican electorate then turned to a supposedly better manager, an ex-Coca-Cola executive and a representative of the old Catholic, anti-revolutionary constituency, Vicente Fox Quesada. When Fox barnstormed his way to the presidency in 2000, ending the official party’s seventy-one-year tenure of office, many asked how he would govern in these unprecedented circumstances. Would he be able to to create an alternative myth, based, perhaps, on the incongruent symbols of Coca-Cola and Catholicism?

The question assumed that the PRI lost because its myth collapsed and that regimes, like nations or societies, cannot survive without myths. Nearly a decade on, we can offer a tentative answer: Fox, a much better candidate than he was a president, proved hesitant and indecisive; he squandered his huge political capital; and he certainly failed to create a new — PANista, Catholic, Coca-Cola? — myth in place of the old. But perhaps this is a question mal posée. Like its counterpart in, say, the Soviet Union, the Mexican revolutionary myth was the product of distinct historical circumstances; it never achieved a monopoly of Mexican minds; thus its hegemony was always partial and full of holes — a ‘Swiss-cheese’ hegemony, it has been said. It had been painstakingly built up over decades and, for a time, it provided the mythical carapace for a regime whose basic stability depended a great deal on the workings of the Mexican political economy. While the latter functioned (roughly, during the classic

173 William H. McNeill, Mythistory and Other Essays (Chicago, 1986), 23, 25, advances this odd and rather obscurantist thesis. Since ‘myth lies at the basis of modern society . . . in the absence of believable myths, public action becomes difficult to . . . sustain’; therefore, ‘discrediting old myths without finding new ones to replace them erodes the basis for common action’.

174 This seems to reflect a contemporary syndrome whereby good — which means glib, well-financed, telegenic — candidates turn into poor presidents (or prime ministers).

175 Wayne A. Cornelius, ‘Subnational Politics and Democratization: Tensions between Center and Periphery in the Mexican Political System’, in Wayne A. Cornelius, Todd A. Eisenstadt and Jane Hindley (eds.), Subnational Politics and Democratization in Mexico (La Jolla, 1999), 4. Credit for this trope (or meme?) goes to Jeffrey Rubin.
period, c.1950–c.1980), the myth helped. But the myth increasingly parted company with a contrasting reality; and when the economy foundered after 1980, the myth could not save the regime; indeed, it had increasingly become a critical and contestatory myth, deployed against the regime by its opponents. In this form, it still survives and may even receive some refurbishment from the anniversary of 2010. But Salinas’s ‘social liberal’ gamble nearly paid off; and had the economy not succumbed in 1994–5, the PRI might well have survived several more years,\(^\text{176}\) notwithstanding its discursive apostasy, its repudiation of the Revolution in favour of ‘social liberalism’, and its promotion of Ponciano Arriaga over the old caudillos of the Revolution.

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St Antony’s College, Oxford

Alan Knight
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\footnotesize{\(^\text{176}\) Miguel Basáñez, *El pulso de los sexenios: 20 años de crisis en México* (Mexico City, 1990), charts a progressive loss of support for the PRI throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a trend which clearly indicated that, at some future point, the PRI would lose power. But the how, when (precisely), and why of the denouement remained open, subject to a range of contingent factors.}