

National Liberalism, Local Liberalisms

IN APRIL 1846, A YUCATECAN OFFICIAL traveled through his jurisdiction, Motul, to inspect the villages and report on their condition to the state government. The picture the *jefe político*, or political chief, painted in his report was not favorable. Most striking was the near-universal neglect of public buildings. In town after town he saw that the *casas consistoriales*, buildings intended to house the municipal authorities elected under new republican rules, were near ruin. Jails and military barracks were ill maintained and thus inadequate for the enforcement of republican law. Schools worried the jefe as well. Many villages lacked them entirely, and where they did exist it was often impossible to find a qualified teacher, someone prepared to teach villagers the fundamentals of republican government. The jefe suggested that village authorities levy taxes to address some of these problems, but he recognized that in most cases there were simply no resources to tax. The jefe's observations suggested that Mexico's new institutions were failing to transform the country's indigenous people from colonial subjects into liberal citizens. There was often little distinction in the villages between the older indigenous government bodies sanctioned by colonial Spain and the new republican town councils established for independent Mexico. Because traditional indigenous scribes were often the only literate villagers, the jefe observed, they often served as "perpetual mayors." Thirty-four years after the transition to liberalism, and twenty-five years after Mexico's separation from the Spanish monarchy and its establishment of a republican system, it appeared to officials across Mexico that in the villages little had changed.¹

Was this perception correct? Certainly, by the time the Yucatecan jefe made his report, there had been significant transformations in Mexican political life. Beginning in 1812, nearly all adult male Mexicans could

go to the polls to elect representative legislative bodies, and they did so in large numbers. On a local level, Mexicans now had the opportunity to elect and serve as members of newly established town councils that would oversee affairs in all but the smallest villages. And after Mexico gained its independence and established the republic in 1824, Mexicans acquired a government the ultimate authority of which was located not in far-off Spain, but in Mexico itself, and, practically speaking, in relatively nearby state capitals like Oaxaca City and Mérida. The population had gone in a few short years from being subjects to being citizens, a change that brought with it new ways of organizing administration and new bases for demands on the state.

And yet in some ways little had changed. The range of both candidates and issues on which new citizens could vote was nearly as limited as it had been under Spain, and indirect elections quickly filtered out the intentions of the majority of voters. Long-standing village hierarchies were reproduced in local councils, and thus the new bodies tended to replicate colonial arrangements. Colonial structures, both economic and political, often remained intact even where they had been officially abolished. In Oaxaca and Yucatán—the Mexican states that form the core of this study—most indigenous villagers were still poor, and their labor was still the primary source of income for the nonindigenous elite. And, like their colonial Spanish predecessors, new republican government officials struggled daily with their limited capacity to ensure the cooperation of new citizens. All that had changed, it seemed, were the words that government representatives and indigenous villagers used to describe the political and economic order, and the specific institutions that facilitated its perpetuation.

This book argues that this new language and these new institutions were significant. Evidence from the villages shows that new Mexican citizens, whether indigenous villagers, elites, or state officials, went through the motions that liberalism demanded: elections, representative governance, land reform, and the military draft. Because there was also continuity in the structures of authority, many scholars have seen their compliance with new institutional rules as inconsequential, little more than a veneer. Yet as they went through the motions of liberalism, Mexicans also engaged with the content of liberalism. Crucially, this occurred even where physical evidence of state presence was slight. The book traces the transition to liberalism in the states of Oaxaca and Yucatán, where more than three-quarters of the citizenry was indigenous and where these *indígenas*² composed the vast majority of those living outside of major cities. The Oaxacan and Yucatecan state governments—and certainly the federal government—had few resources to call on in controlling the everyday

activities of this majority population, and the authority of the state was often in question. But changes in institutions nevertheless triggered intense negotiation between indigenous people and the state surrounding the meanings of liberal republican institutions, policies, and systems. The meanings that they could agree on became, for them, liberalism. Liberalism in nineteenth-century Mexico cannot be evaluated in reference to any liberal ideal. Rather, it was built in the context of politics on the ground.

Of course, there was not always consensus that this kind of liberalism was indeed liberal. The content of local agreements, forged in the context of local exigencies, often clashed with a developing “official” liberalism—the ideas, policies, and institutions articulated at the level of the national government. Thus, throughout the first half of the century, national leaders struggled to control the meaning of liberalism and to impose their often-changing vision of national politics. In 1857, when this study ends, Mexico’s national state was beginning a concerted attempt to consolidate its control and regularize political practice across the country. It did not, however, do so in a vacuum. Liberalism, the guiding principle of Mexico’s latter-century national reform, had by that time become entrenched in the regions. If national figures did not see local practices as liberal, local people—both villagers and officials—often did; and, to them, the national government’s insistence on reform in the name of liberalism made little sense. A careful and locally grounded look at Mexico’s *first* transition to liberalism between 1812 and 1857 helps explain both the appeal—and indeed often the success—of liberal politics in the regions both before and after the beginning of the Reform and the obstacles faced by the national government in consolidating and controlling liberal politics across the nation.

For much of Mexico in the nineteenth century, at the heart of the contradictions of liberalism was the political identity of indigenous people. Among the central goals of liberals at the national level was the elimination of ethnic distinctions believed to hamper the development of rational economic and political development. But, locally, these ethnic distinctions were crucial to the relationship between state and society; often they lay at the heart of the state’s legitimacy among indigenous people. Any transition to new institutions had to take this into account. The indigenous question was, then, both at the center of the negotiation of local liberalisms and at the center of the contradictions between the local and the national. The relationships that developed in and around the dilapidated public buildings in villages like those in Motul were the foundation of the sometimes tenuous legitimacy of both state and national governments after independence. Precisely in the places where the Yucatecan inspector

saw a severe disjuncture between liberal ideals and indigenous reality, it is possible to observe the negotiation of the terms of liberal citizenship and the roots of conflict over what those terms would be.

Why “Liberalism”?

It is necessary at the outset to explain my choice of the term *liberalism* to describe early nineteenth-century Mexican politics and government. The broad constellation of institutions and practices that characterized Mexico in these years could certainly be called by other names—*republicanism* or *constitutionalism* and perhaps even *democracy*. In a strict sense, these descriptors are more accurate; liberalism as an ideology does not imply a precise set of institutions or a particular way of structuring politics. Scholars have used other phrases such as *democratic revolution* or the *transition from the Old Regime* or even the *advent of modernity* to describe the broad global process of which the emergence of new Mexican institutions was a part. Yet *liberalism* best describes the political, ideological, and institutional changes of the early nineteenth century, in large part because it aptly describes what Mexicans *understood* to be shared by the numerous regimes that governed Mexico after independence.

To be sure, even if Mexicans could agree that the new system was liberal, there was little consensus about what, exactly, liberalism meant. Nineteenth-century ideological liberalism assumed, in Nils Jacobsen’s words, a “bewildering array of guises,” ranging from “a doctrine of emancipation to one of justifying a given status quo.”³ In the first half of the nineteenth century, those who actively espoused liberalism could agree, in general, that the state should be limited and that both its limitations and its duties were determined by the fundamental rights of citizens as detailed in constitutions.⁴ Yet within this broad definition, numerous strands of thought emerged, coalesced, and evolved over the course of the first half of the century.⁵

Also significant is that this loose conglomeration of liberal ideas was not actively set against “conservatism.” Liberalism and conservatism have often been treated as opposites, the differences between them forming the fundamental dividing line between nineteenth-century thinkers in Mexico reaching back to independence. But the tendency to project a liberal/conservative divide onto this early era is anachronistic. Scholars have shown that in early national Mexico, *all* elite political thought evolved from European liberalism. There were certainly those who were more “traditionalist” and others who were more “radical.” But traditionalist and later centralist thought emerged out of the same body of influences—in particular, the ideas underlying the 1812 Spanish Constitution of Cádiz—

as did more radical or moderate thought. The word *conservative* was not used to describe political ideology until the later 1840s. Before that, it referred to conservative values, which were often as apparent in the words of moderate and radical liberals as in those of more traditionalist thinkers. The terms that politicians *did* use, especially *federalism* and *centralism*, are not analogous with liberalism and conservatism. Federalists and centralists were nearly all republicans, and federalists and centralists alike were reformers; they differed most clearly on the questions of how and how fast reform should occur. Even the group most often identified with an unrelenting conservatism, the church, participated in this general liberal consensus. At least until the 1850s, the church hierarchy defended itself not by assaulting liberalism but rather by claiming its own rights within it. The major coalitions that characterized postindependence Mexican politics developed as versions of the same basic beliefs that had not, before the 1850s, diverged to the point that any of them were no longer “liberal.”⁶

This was reflected in the institutions that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century. With one important exception, both the federalist and centralist governments established between the fall of the Spanish empire and 1857 were deeply influenced by liberal ideology writ large.⁷ Practically speaking, this translated into a basic set of institutions, including most importantly elections for both local and supralocal offices that, although they varied in form, persisted throughout much of the period. In this sense, liberalism was not just an ideology but also a system of government. Certainly, it is possible to trace the origins of conservatism in these years and in these institutions, especially in the centralist regime of the late 1830s. But centralism was still deeply concerned with liberty; if it privileged liberty over equality, this does not make it antiliberal but rather, as Josefina Vásquez has argued, liberalism of a different kind.⁸ Before the 1850s, *liberalism* remained a loose and expansive term, one that described not just a set of political beliefs but most importantly described the postcolonial system itself.

For most Mexicans in the early nineteenth century, it was liberalism as a system—as a set of institutions and practices—that mattered most. Mexicans, regardless of their social position and regardless of their particular political beliefs, understood that they now lived under a system that was fundamentally different from what had come before. This was not a monarchy; there was no longer an unquestioned source of authority that bound people to the state. What replaced the overarching notion of subjecthood, with its implication of subordination, was the idea of citizenship, backed up by the notion of liberty. Whatever precise institutions governed at any particular moment were understood to be informed by this fundamental change. As James Dunkerley has written, “imagination

mattered throughout” the nineteenth century in Latin America; in the first half of that century, no matter what it actually looked like, “liberalism” was a central element of what Mexicans imagined they were doing, and Mexicans imagined they were doing something new. This book defines liberalism as the concept that best captures the political and ideological context that Mexicans believed that they shared.⁹

In proposing this definition, I make distinctions between liberalism as a proactive movement, liberalism as a system, and liberalism as a political culture. The first of these is least important here. In the first half of the nineteenth century there was no consolidated liberal “movement” in Mexico; there were certainly political activists who could be called “liberals,” but their ideas and plans encompassed a broad spectrum of both ideas and institutions. More important is that in these years Mexico was consistently governed under a new set of institutions that could also be called liberal, including elections, a new tax structure, new definitions of land tenure, and new methods of allocating the military draft. As these were implemented, the people who participated in them—economic elites, political officials, urban plebeians, or indigenous villagers—had to abide by their basic terms. Finally, with this shared system came a shared sense of the transformation of local, regional, and national politics. The political culture of liberalism developed out of this shared sense, as Mexicans strove to incorporate new institutions and sought to make them meet their needs and conform to their beliefs.¹⁰

The incorporation of new institutions was made easier by the fact that those institutions were themselves notably hybrid, encompassing radical innovations but also constructed in ways that allowed for continuity with the Old Regime.¹¹ Even so, for many Mexicans, the process of implementation would raise contradictions. Colonial political cultures were deeply rooted in both the reciprocal obligations of monarchs and subjects and a fundamental distinction between Spanish and indigenous people. Liberal institutions, with their emphasis on individual citizenship and the erasure of ethnic differences, threatened many of the assumptions that had made colonial government function. These fundamental changes in political identity were not universally desired by either indigenous people or representatives of the state. The former, although they did gain certain advantages from their new juridical equality, were also reluctant to give up the privileges that the colonial system had offered. And the latter, although they saw ultimate advantages in a liberal transformation, worried that the elimination of colonial bonds and distinctions would make governance itself impossible. The challenge of Mexico’s liberal experiment was to find ways to make liberalism’s basic precepts compatible with those of deeply rooted political cultures. As they negotiated ways to make this

happen, Mexicans created new political cultures, new sets of discourses and actions that gave liberal institutions and languages specific meaning and incorporated them into everyday political life.

In light of this process, it would not make sense to say that either government officials or indigenous people resisted liberalism, *per se*. Government officials were obligated to enforce the new national agenda, and they often agreed with the precepts that underlay it. When that agenda interfered with their ability to govern, they used their authority not to contradict new laws but to implement them in a way that was more acceptable but still recognizably “liberal.” And indigenous people were not inherently unwilling to embrace the institutions of the new government, even though they threatened their ethnically defined political identity. Instead, they used them; as Antonio Annino puts it, they had an “extraordinary capacity . . . to use a liberal category like ‘citizenship’ to defend themselves from the liberal State.”¹² Indigenous people and government officials, through their words and actions in response to institutional change, and through their negotiation with each other, pushed the boundaries of what liberalism as a system of government could mean. By doing so, they shifted that meaning often significantly. In majority indigenous Oaxaca and Yucatán, this would be the central process in the creation of unique liberal political cultures.

As such, that process was intensely local. In all of Mexico, the relationship between state and society had to be rebuilt around a new framework after independence, as colonial notions of state legitimacy met liberal ones. In each new state, however, local circumstances meant that the precise challenge that liberalism posed to existing relationships was also different, as were the responses of both the government and new citizens. The first Mexican federalism afforded state governments considerable latitude. Each state produced its own constitution, and these documents determined the basic structures of politics in each state’s territory. As lawmakers in the states sought to accommodate and take advantage of new institutions in local contexts, they responded to the national liberal project by creating multiple systems that varied considerably on key points, including the structure of town government, the bases of the franchise, and taxation.¹³ When put into practice by local officials and when negotiated by these officials and their constituencies, what began as a national project was immediately transformed into “local liberalisms,” each with unique content and context.

The fact that what was understood to be liberalism could vary so widely is essential to our understanding of early-nineteenth-century Mexican politics. It is also crucial to our understanding of the latter half of the century. Indeed, the choice of “liberalism” to describe postindependence

politics is a product of hindsight. Toward the end of the period that this book covers, liberalism coalesced as a proactive movement, as self-identified “liberals” began in earnest to organize themselves into a party that aimed to transform society, proposing a set of interlinked goals and aspirations in which the expansion of citizenship and property rights would ostensibly coincide with the freeing up of markets and capital, leading to prosperity and universal advancement. These latter-century “new liberals” were also nationalists; they hoped to consolidate the Mexican nation, in large part by removing the vestiges of competing associations and regularizing political practice throughout the territory. By 1857, these liberals were in power in Mexico City and had begun the conflictual process of transformation known as *La Reforma*, an attempt to achieve once and for all the kind of liberal society that they envisioned.¹⁴

This book’s argument about the early nineteenth century suggests that liberals’ task was made far more difficult by the fact that something called liberalism and understood to *be* liberalism was already established and familiar in the Mexico that they hoped to transform. Mexicans in countless local places had, over the course of the years since independence, incorporated new institutions into their political practice, new institutions they had learned to recognize as liberal. In the eyes of proactive liberals after 1857, these incorporations had been haphazard and incomplete at best. But to those who practiced daily politics on the ground, they *were* liberalism, and the distinctions between them and what the national liberals proposed were not nearly as clear as the latter might have hoped. Liberals’ task was made even more difficult by the fact that liberalism, as understood by most Mexicans, was also multiple. After 1857, reformers had to convince Mexicans not only of the differences between their vision and the national liberalism that had come before but also of the differences between that vision and the many and deeply local liberalisms that had developed in the preceding years. The Reform arrived in a Mexico in which “liberalism” already had a long history and in which local people had given it meaning, content, and institutional force, a Mexico already liberal but in multiple and often contradictory ways.

Indigenous Citizens compares two Mexican states that shared certain characteristics but followed divergent paths as their governments and populations adapted to the changes in institutions and ideologies that followed independence—to the establishment and expansion of citizenship, to the encouragement of private property ownership, and to new fiscal and military duties to the state. While the comparison has much to tell us about what happened in these two places, it also clarifies what the simultaneous existence of a shared sense of liberalism and local differentiation meant for the development of Mexico as a nation. Oaxaca’s and Yucatán’s

political systems and political cultures were not simply “variations” on a common liberal model. Nor were they “responses to” or even “engagements with” a clearly identifiable liberalism. Mexico’s national liberalism appeared in local places not as a coherent guide to work from but rather as a set of basic assumptions represented by a set of baseline institutions that could be implemented in any number of ways. In the years after independence from Spain, Mexican liberalism was invented on the ground, producing multiple forms specific to local contexts. Reconstructing the content of each of Mexico’s local liberalisms is crucial to understanding local politics. Yet what was and was not shared—and what was and was not *understood* to be shared—among all these local liberalisms is central to any characterization of liberalism in Mexico as a nation.

*Popular Liberalism, Local Liberalisms,
and the Comparative Project*

In 1968, Charles Hale wrote that historiography on Mexican liberalism was dominated by two basic interpretations. One, advanced by liberals themselves, claimed that Mexican liberalism represented a struggle against deep-rooted colonial structures that had long oppressed the people of Mexico. These structures proved extremely difficult to displace and thus made the implementation of liberal reform exceedingly complicated. Proponents of the second interpretation countered that liberal policies had senselessly attacked forms of social life and power that had functioned quite well in colonial New Spain and that, by introducing inappropriate ideas into Mexico, liberalism had set in motion the cycles of disorder and instability that characterized the nation’s nineteenth-century history.¹⁵ Although these arguments are in many ways diametrically opposed, they share one important commonality. Both echo the worries of the Yucatecan inspector for Motul; both, in effect, are explanations of liberalism’s failure to produce the results that were ostensibly intended.

Without doubt, postindependence governments did “fail” Mexico’s and Latin America’s majorities in many ways. Viewed both from the end of the nineteenth century and from the present day, nowhere is there universal prosperity; instead, social structures were and are characterized by deep inequalities. Accordingly, many scholars have attempted to explain why the liberal theory that informed nineteenth-century policy did not deliver on its promises. As they have done so, they have taken the two arguments described above in new but related directions. Some have argued that colonial economic structures continued to drive society through much of the nineteenth century and that, in the face of their strength, liberalism was relatively inconsequential; what is important to

note is not the changes that liberalism brought but rather the “impressive continuity” of economic and political behaviors, attitudes, and mentalities through the colonial era and up to the present day.¹⁶ Others have advanced a strictly culturalist argument, in which the persistence of Iberian political culture hindered and deformed the progress of the liberal transition to modernity.¹⁷

Still others have questioned the goals and methods of Latin America’s liberal experiment. By the end of the nineteenth century, according to this argument, liberally inspired governments succeeded in their goal of reducing people’s commitments to institutions or groups other than the state and of thus freeing up labor and capital markets to produce a more efficient and effective use of resources. This success, however, came at the expense of the people who would come to provide most of the labor and yet control few of the resources. Indigenous peoples, slaves and the descendants of slaves, and other groups ill-situated to take advantage of the new approach to national progress would come to form a disenfranchised underclass. The dismantling of colonial structures would result in a society in which liberal economic goals would overshadow related notions of political and economic equality. In the words of E. Bradford Burns, “the individual rights almost universally promised by the idealistic, if unrealistic constitutions proved meaningless to a repressed majority”; faced with the onslaught of “progress,” he concludes, “folk society disintegrated.”¹⁸

For Mexico and especially for Mexico’s indigenous population, approaches to liberalism that posit its fundamental failure have contributed to a powerful narrative about the causes of the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910. According to this chronology, the gradual consolidation of liberalism through the first half of the nineteenth century culminated in the constitution of 1857, which affirmed the ascendancy of the liberal ideal. Most significant for indígenas and other rural agriculturalists, the accompanying *Ley Lerdo* declared that all land must be converted into private property, a decree that struck at the heart of indigenous communities where survival was based primarily on the use of communally held territory. Increasingly intense application of this law in the latter half of the century resulted in escalating unrest and finally in the explosion of popular violence in 1910. There is much of value in this narrative. Many Mexican peasants did lose their land over the course of the nineteenth century, and liberal state interventions certainly had something to do with it. In some cases at least, loss of land sparked popular participation in the Revolution. Despite revisionist attempts to reinterpret the Revolution as a movement of the Mexican bourgeoisie, most historians would concede that it also had deep popular roots and that, in many places, the expropriation of land was central to the equation.¹⁹